

**Death in *Fortnite*: A theological exploration of
Fortnite's representation of death and its perceived
effect on youths in Malta.**

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This dissertation is the product of my own work, and the work of others has been properly
acknowledged throughout

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ABBREVIATIONS

Game Lingo

LMS	Last Man Standing (sic.)
MMOG	Massively Multiplayer Online Game
MUD	Multi-User Domain
NE	Narratological Embeddings
RL	Real Life
SN	Social Network
TP	Third Place
TPS	Third Person Shooter
VVG	Violent Video Game

Fortnite-related

AL	<i>Apex Legends</i>
BP	Battle Pass
BR	Battle Royale
LTM	Limited Time Mode
PUBG	<i>PlayerUnknown Battle Grounds</i>

Terror Management Theory

DT	Death Thoughts
DDM	Distal Defence Mechanisms
FW	Fragmented Words test
MS	Mortality Salience
ODM	Proximal Defence Mechanisms
TMT	Terror Management Theory

Methodology

OPEQ	OPen Ended Questions
PLEX	PLayful EXperience framework
UX	User Experience

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that every three to five years a ground-breaking and disruptive game emerges[1]. *Fortnite*¹ has been described as the “high school musical of gaming: witty, approachable and with the best dance moves”[5]; “the most culturally relevant game that we have had potentially ever”[6]; and a “phenomenon”[7]. Last year it was the most revenue-generating game[8], and, although early this year it showed signs of slowing down[9], it is still the most popular game[10].

Fortnite's success lies in the interplay between: a non-violent third person shooter (TPS); colourful cartoonish-looking; non-gore; fought in an (innovative?) Battle Royale (BR) genre; tactical-building while scavenging resources. The ludological style is integrated in a free-to-play ‘games as a service’² model, where Epic makes money through the selling of battle passes (BP) and vBucks³ which allows the player to purchase emotes and skins. Albeit it is a free game, 68.8% of *Fortnite* players have spent money on in-game purchases, averaging at \$84.67 each[12] and \$1m sales per day[13].

Cultural theorist Huizinga argues that we are *Homo Ludens* – we are born to play. It is not just a matter of how we play in our everyday life but playing defines our culture, and ultimately our own being. In fact, Huizinga describes play as “stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own”[14]. Taking cue from this stepping-out mechanism, Detweiler claims that nearly all video-games attempt to create a sphere with a unique and magical disposition[15]. Character formation, and hence theological formation, happens in community, and thus, Huizinga argues, “the feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual normal, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game”[14]. This interplay of meaning-making has sparked Huizinga’s concept of the ‘magic-circle’ where a temporary world, within the ordinary world, is created and “dedicated to the performance of an act apart”[14]. Zimmerman and Salen[16] furthered Huizinga’s concept by merging it with Lantz’s[17] and reframed it in terms of semiotics and design[18]. During gameplay, the gamer is invited to embrace the game’s world once she has crossed the membrane of the video-game. In this digital-space, she is met with dreams and fantasy, where she can escape the mundane while meaning is created.

¹ *Fortnite*[2] offers 3 main modes[3]: Save the world. – a cooperative shooter-survival mode; Creative – players create custom worlds; and Battle Royal (BR). Unless otherwise noted, when speaking of *Fortnite*, I will be referring to the BR-mode where a hundred players are pitted against each other, at times in teams, until the last man standing (LMS) wins. The game goes through ten-week seasons introducing several limited modes, skins, emotes and weapons[4].

² Such games typically receive a long stream of periodic new paid-for content[11].

³ In-game currency.

Within the magic-circle, everything is, in some way, transformative. “Each time a person leaves the magic-circle they bring meaning and experience”[19]. While critics of the magic-circle try to strongly formalise their understanding of the membrane through identifying game design elements and make it sound as an alternative world, I will be referring to the magic-circle as giving meaning to experiences which are intertwined with the real life (RL). Meaning is hardly made from the actual game itself, but from the interconnectivity of meaning which our lives attest to, a position which I echo from Zimmerman: “[m]eaning is everywhere and infinitely subtle, appearing wherever one wishes to look”[18].

In this light, as witnessed in *Fortnite*, RL-friendships strongly impact the meaning-mechanics of the game. As we shall see in the pages to come, *Fortnite* is built to achieve this feeling of togetherness, of a mutual withdrawing and rejecting RL norms. Huizinga goes on to argue that play becomes a sacred space, which continues to shed its radiance on the RL. Thus, like every other cultural setter, *Fortnite* shapes the lives of its players. Although it is not a religious game, it is imbued with theological nuances.

Gamers have described games as ‘sacred’, ‘holy’ and meditative[20]. Hence, God-speak is experienced and revealed in the game. Our vocation is to resist labelling the game as good or bad, but rather to reflect on the game’s theological themes[15]. As we shall see in Chapter V, *Fortnite* is full of theological underpinnings. To introduce some: Gnostic understanding of personhood; discipleship formation; promoting a theology of fun which moves from relationship based on shared experiences to fun-based relationships; incarnation of the avatar; post-mortem existentialism; reincarnation; violence and death. In relation with death, amongst the broad introductions found in Chapter II, of particular interest to the reader will be the reflection on the BR-genre which pits a hundred players in a survive as-long-as-you-can battle, which ultimately brings a number of theology-related questions: can death be ‘fun’? How does mixing of death and humour impact our theological understanding of death? Can death be positive?

Hence, the main question this dissertation will be reflecting upon is: How is *Fortnite* altering the perception of death of a Maltese Catholic Gen-Z⁴? Our journey to explore this question will take us through several milestones. Our first port of call would be a techno-sociological understanding of the game in question, where we will reflect on the BR-genre and look at other competing games in this genre. We will then proceed to study *Fortnite* proper and try to understand this game’s ludological success. I identified three areas of study: *Fortnite* which acts as an emerging social network; its gender neutrality; and a rich user experience. Chapter III will

⁴ I will be understanding Gen-Z as those born after 1997 as per APA[21] and PEW[22].

explore the methodology of the research by delving into the emergent field of games and theology. To help us reflect better on the change in perception, I will introduce the qualitative interview methodology in use in this research, and the ethical procedures. Chapter IV will be the heart of the project, where I will offer a critical engagement with death as presented in gaming and proceed with an analysis of how death is portrayed in this game, emphasising the link between the player and the avatar, and the humour portrayed in the killing itself. BR emphasises permadeath, which is both a ludological and a theological concept. The interviews with Maltese Gen-Zs will help us understand how the discussed ludological representation is being understood by youths. From the interviews we will tease out three intertwined theological themes, which will be the subject matter of the concluding journey (Chapter V). Given that the selected group of Gen-Zs form a part of a Maltese Catholic parish, their understanding will be contrasted with Catholic Tradition. Having a clearer understanding of the theological footprints in *Fortnite*, we can attempt a number of takeaways from this project which can be used in further research.

The gaming scene is ever changing. Every season, *Fortnite* keeps changing. Similarly, the Church's vocation is to reform its pastoral ministry as the needs arise. Hence the question: in this culture of flux, where is the Spirit leading us to explore? While our first reaction as carers would be to see the addiction to gaming as a problem to be tackled, the proposed journey takes this game "seriously"[14] as a *locus theologicus*. Throughout our journey, the Spirit is inviting us to embark on a task which is both grace-filled and risk-laden: the discernment of theology within digital culture.

II. FORTNITE'S SUCCESS STORY

We will start our journey by reflecting on the game proper through a summary of an unpublished article I wrote while reading for this chapter[23]. I will be presenting *Fortnite's* imprint on the historical-narrative of the BR-genre, while theorising that its success is related to ludological and design choices which see the game as an emerging meaning-making social network (SN) and a Third Place (TP). Hence, *Fortnite* is to be regarded as a spiritually-laden locus.

A. History of Battle Royale

While many gamers would erroneously name *Fortnite* as the herald of the BR-genre, Scholz refers to games such as *Unreal Tournament's*[24] deathmatch, where there is ultimately one winner, as the genre's origin[25]. I disagree because a deathmatch has limited interaction with the environment, and while modes such as LMS allow the least-killed player to win, this is still somewhat different to *Fortnite's* BR. Thus, a historical overview depicting how literature has inspired movies, games and ultimately *Fortnite* is presented.

1) Literature

Bowman[7] highlights a similarity between LMS and BR and determines Koushun Takami's novel *Battle Royale*, as the originator of the BR-genre, which portrays a group of adolescents fighting for their life on an island. A similar concept was later developed in Collins' *The Hunger Games* (THG) trilogy[26]–[28].

2) Games

In gaming, Schwartz[1] identifies *Minecraft*[29] as the first game allowing private users to engage in BR-games due to its random spawn points, scattered weaponry, and environment-engagement developing the first BR-inspired ludology combining THG with LMS.

The survival mode started attracting other games, including *DayZ:Arma 2*[30]. *DayZ* is more of a survival game rather than a shooter, and one player of this mod, Brendan 'PlayerUnknown' Greene, "modded a mod"[31] and released an iteration of mods⁵ climaxing with *PlayerUnknown Battle Grounds (PUBG)*[32].

3) PUBG and Fortnite

Fortnite has several innovative ideas, but surely spearheading the BR-genre is not one. *Fortnite* first started as a kill-the-zombies-survival game using a foggy-grey *Resident Evil*[33]-type environment, until releasing *Fortnite: Battle Royale*[3], thus annoying *PUBG's* Bluehole, and a legal battle ensued⁶. The cartoonish look makes the game "timeless" and "fun"[35]. Its producers speak of *Fortnite* as centred on: engaging one's environment

⁵ For more in depth timeline:[7].

⁶ Later dropped in 2018[34].

and shooting, hence being built as a platform to engage the environment and “just play in the landscape of [their] brain”[35].

Both games enjoy staggering numbers. As of March 2019, *Fortnite* has more than 250 million players[36], albeit only 78.3 million would be active per month. In special events, such as the Marshmello concert⁷, 10.8 million players logged in, in comparison to the 900 thousand average daily users and 3 million on special days for *PUBG*[37]. One caveat of these statistics is that they are PC only. If one combines both PC and console platforms, both games hit the 30 million daily active userbase[38]. A late player to the BR-genre is *Apex Legends*[39] (*AL*) which for a period directly challenged *Fortnite* (Figure 1).⁸

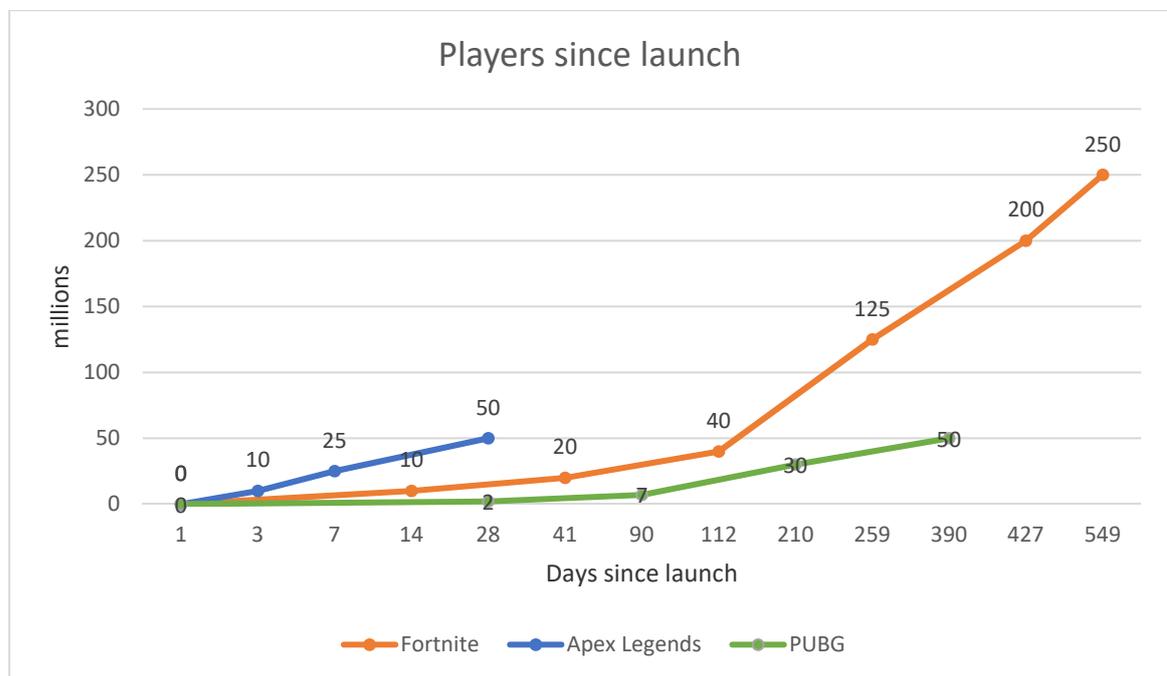


Figure 1. Players since launch[40]–[43]

Despite being challenged in the courts by *PUBG* over the BR-model, and in numbers by both *PUBG* and *AL*, *Fortnite* seems to hold on to its ground. The success of *Fortnite* begs the question: what makes *Fortnite* so attractive?

⁷ On 3/2/2019 DJ Marshmello performed a live concert in Fortnite.

⁸ It seems that most data related to *AL* stops at the 50m mark. No further data could be obtained.

B. *Fortnite's attractions*

In contrast to *PUBG*, *Fortnite's* cartoonish-fun-style hides the violence encountered when ravaging buildings and killing takes the form of 'fun'. Even death is presented as 'fun', a concept we will unpack in Chapter V. Our reflection then proceeds to assess the main revenue-making tools for Epic: skins and emotes.

1) *Game's design*

Ludologically the game is simple: players jump off a flying-bus on an island with nothing but a pickaxe allowing them to forage building material which they can use for protection. A deadly storm ravages the island, and if one is caught in it, they start to die, – forcing the game to be more competitive. The island is strewn with weapons and resources which the player can use for her survival. “Whether by a deft flick of an opponent’s shotgun, the encroaching storm, or self-inflicted error, death is the necessary banality that gives this game its arc and form”[44].

In its non-gore style, as one navigates the map, one would notice that there are no cadavers lying around, because they would have been sucked into oblivion by a drone. The player is then transported into the viewpoint of her killer, until she is killed and the loop continues in a matryoshka format.

2) *Skins and emotes*



Figure 2. Skins from Seasons 2 and 3[2]

By default the game offers eight skins and an emote, each of which can then be replaced at a premium. At every game, the player is randomly assigned a skin, which varies in ethnicity and gender. In theory, a player can advance through the rankings without obtaining any skills, although this is socially difficult. Kagey highlights the emergence of a new bullying in school-playgrounds, where players are compelled to buy skins because “default is for losers”[45].

Emotes are automatically given, bought, and earned. Similar to skins, some would have permeated into the game from RL, with others making it to the dancefloors worldwide[46]. Other emotes such as Webb’s Vine

sensation has made it also to *Fortnite*, thus taking the journey from internet to RL to *Fortnite*, with several copyright lawsuits triggered[47]–[49].

C. *Fortnite's disruptive nature*

As noted at the outset, every few years the gaming-world meets a disruptive game. The staggering numbers, combined with the wildfire effect it had on youths, leads me to believe that *Fortnite* can be both considered as a disruptive and an emerging inclusive and creative-provoking SN[50]. Taking cue from Penn's description, we will explore the game's design to attract both genders and provide a thick-rich user experience (UX).

1) *Social network*

Fortnite is not a mere game, it was “2018's most important social network”[51], as emphasised by Williams[52] and De Moor calling it *the* new SN[53], similar to a skatepark, where watching is as fun as competing[54].

In fact, *Fortnite* consumes an average of 25% of the leisure time of 40% of US teens who game at least once a week[55]. As illustrated by Figure 3, *Fortnite's* attraction is strongest with the tweens, driving them in millions from other SNs[54].

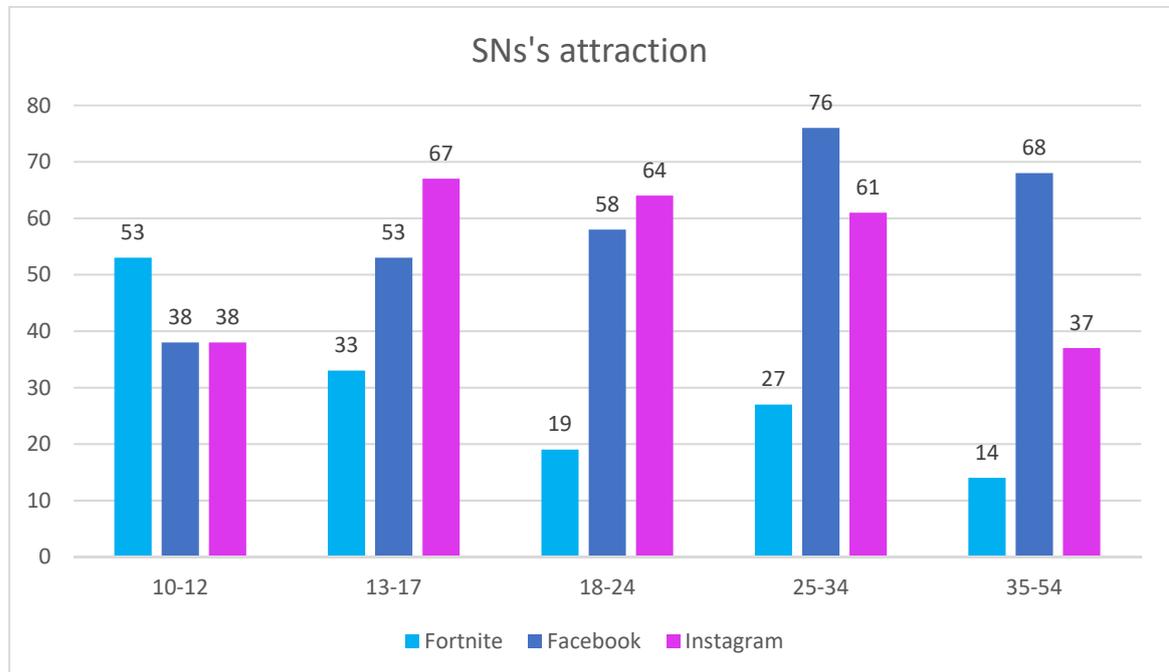


Figure 3. SNs' attraction[55]

The game allows an environment where players socialise and have a shared experience[50]. Stephen compares *Fortnite* to a “global living room, and a kind of codex for where culture has gone this year”[51]. It is so

powerful, that Gen-Zs feel they should be where their friends are, especially as they “are much more used to living on platforms like *Fortnite*”[56]. Basing my conclusions on Liew’s[57] research, I present a taxonomy where *Fortnite* could be effectively considered an SN⁹:

- a) Every SN started with a fun-element;
- b) Spreads through word of mouth;
- c) Single-mode (without e-friends) works well. Traditional SNs function in the same manner: start creating content and people will follow;
- d) Multiplayer-mode works better;
- e) Creation and consumption are seamlessly merged. In *Fortnite*, post-mortem (content-creation), the players spectate others (content-consumption);
- f) Mimetic experiences thrive (ex. Snapchat filters are promulgated after one sees it being used and re-use it), and in *Fortnite*: one learns game tricks and cultural behaviour through streaming;
- g) Algorithmically the best content is viewed: finally, ninety-eight players would be witnessing the battle for the BR-victory, while in SNs algorithms prepare content on one’s newsfeed;
- h) SNs are favoured by women[58]–[60]¹⁰;
- i) SNs foster a community outside of the network. *Fortnite*’s seasons and challenges encourage players to discuss beyond the game-realm;
- j) Video is key;
- k) An advertising platform: NFL/Nike/Marvel advertise through *Fortnite* skins[56];
- l) Gen-Zs do not necessarily want to share intimate details of their lives but prefer sharing experiences. The latter is still ‘social’, albeit not in the Facebook manner[61];
- m) *Fortnite*’s players learn to negotiate conflict, become independent, and explore their personality[62];
- n) Unlocked skins/emotes are a status symbol akin to influencer status on other SNs[63];
- o) Ability to forge peer-relationships providing a sense of belonging[62];
- p) Better than other SNs, *Fortnite* allows gamers to connect on a level that is more “uncurated and unfiltered”[55];
- q) To start playing *Fortnite*, a newbie needs to be initiated[52], a tactic replicating other SN’s life-cycle[64].

⁹ Unless indicated, my conclusions are based on [57].

¹⁰ Cf. Designed gender-neutral.

r) The NRG research identifies three main affinity drivers which SNs provide: Connection; Worthwhile experience; and Fun use. *Fortnite* tops the three categories[55];

Citing NRG’s research, and referring to the above taxonomy, I conclude that *Fortnite* not only incorporates all the benefits of SNs, but surpasses them as per Figure 4. This further highlights the need to study it as a *locus theologicus*, where the numinous meets the spiritual. But before reflecting on that, let us further establish why *Fortnite* is existentially social.

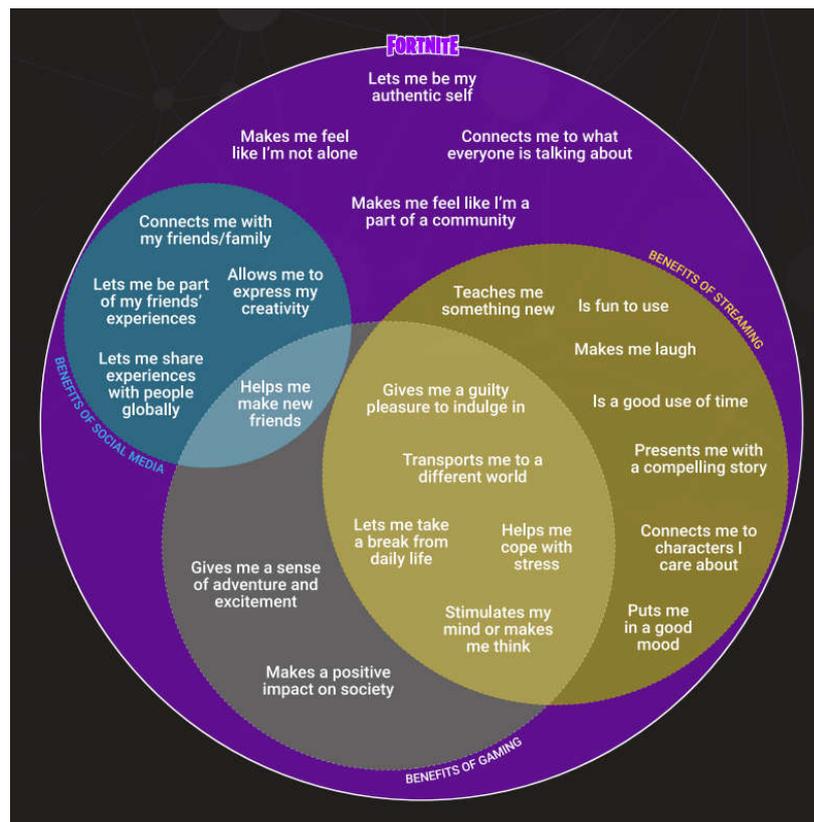


Figure 4. *Fortnite* encompasses all other SNs’ experiences[55]

a) *Sharing of experiences*

Holmes notes that people socialise while practicing other activities, however SNs isolated the act of socialising[65]. But *Fortnite* reverses this. *Fortnite* seems to be answering the need for sharing of experiences, a requirement which necessarily needs the ‘other’. A theological desire which breaks the chains of individuality and opens the person to acknowledge the other (a recurrent theme in Pope Francis’ writings), emerges. Before the game starts, players interact through emotes, voice-chat while playing, and while watching/streaming[66]. *Fortnite* is perceived as helping the player feel part of a community, with a stunning 47% difference between SNs and *Fortnite* when people were asked about helping to forget RL problems; 48% acting on feelings which cannot be acted upon in RL; and a 28% difference in increase of self-confidence[55]. These statistics further show

Fortnite's forte is creating a communitarian shared experience. As Thomas postulates, "connection and isolation are inseparable"[67] and as disciples we are called to reflect on this technology-mediated community formation.

b) *Third Place*

Williams[52] speaks of *Fortnite* as not only a hangout spot, but a "third place"¹¹ which transcends into substituting the RL as witnessed in NRG's[55] report. Oldenburg[68], the originator of TP, outlines eight characteristics which a TP should possess, which I'll be engaging to conclude that *Fortnite* is a space where players interact while playing, rather than vice-versa (Table 1).

TABLE 1.
FORTNITE UNDERSTOOD THROUGH OLDENBURG'S FRAMEWORK

Characteristic	Definition	<i>Fortnite</i>
Neutral Ground	Players are free to join and leave	Yes
Leveller	Irrespective of one's status in RL, what matters is the in-game status	All start as equals
Conversation is key	Conversation is the activity in which playfulness is valued	Voice-chat is a staple
Accessibility	Must be easy to access	Free-to-play on all platforms
Regulars	Tps include several regulars who give the space its characteristic	Streaming-players like Ninja[34] can be considered as Regulars
Low profile	Characterised as homely and without pretension	<i>Fortnite</i> does not fit in the literal sense BUT in the social function which it creates
Mood is playful	Place of frivolity	<i>Fortnite</i> is about fun[35]
Home away from Home	A space where one gets spiritually regenerated in a spirit of warmth and easiness	Figure 5 illustrates

Furthermore, I believe that *Fortnite* is becoming *the* TP, which I back with LendEDU's statistics which show that most players spend at least 6-10 hours playing per week, whereas an average user of Instagram/Snapchat

¹¹ A third alternative between home and work(/school).

would spend roughly 3-4 hours per week[12]. Thus, it can be concluded that *Fortnite* is a community-builder[55]. NRG's statistics show that 25% of total free time of teenagers aged 10-17 is occupied by *Fortnite*, interestingly taking 3% from all activities pre-*Fortnite* (Figure 5).

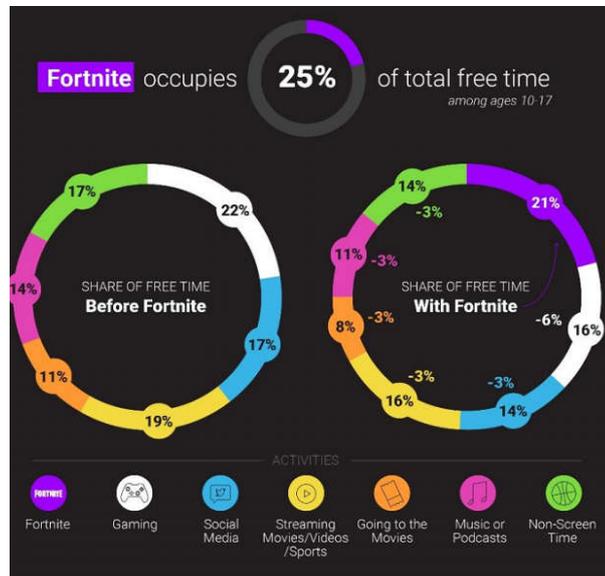


Figure 5. Free time after *Fortnite*[55]

c) A Social Multi-User Domain

In the previous section I have theorised that *Fortnite* is the emergent TP for our youths. In this section, I will be engaging Bartle's[69] work to analyse the super-genre of *Fortnite*: Multi-User Domains (MUDs). I aim to show that *Fortnite* is designed to prioritise the player over the environment and interaction over acting.

Bartle categorises four player-types taxonomies¹² which I will be using in the methodology to introduce each interviewee to the reader. These can be summarised as:

1. Achievers: prefer points-gathering and levelling;
2. Explorers: amuse themselves exploring the map;
3. Socialisers: prefer relationship-building rather than game-objectives;
4. Killers: enjoy killing.

Bartle graphs these four player-types in opposition to each other, and notes that MUDs-games tend to try to find an equilibrium between the axis (Figure 6), further noting that each MUD is in a 4-dimensional tension between Players/World and Acting/Interacting, with each quadrant having as its ideal one gamer-type.

¹² I opt to use his four-player taxonomy over his later eight-player[70] due to its easiness to evaluate.



Figure 6. Bartle Interest's Graph[71]

Having measured his taxonomies in Table 2, I conclude that *Fortnite* prefers players over the world (71% to 50%), and social-interacting over acting (30% to 11%), thus confirming my hypothesis. Hence, I conclude that *Fortnite* is aimed primarily at Socialisers, confirming once more the TP-theory, and shedding more light on the need to study death's representation, because gamers are being attracted to the social aspect of *Fortnite* and not the actual killing. Thus, once an avatar is killed, the player remains 'alive' enjoying the SN *Fortnite* is.

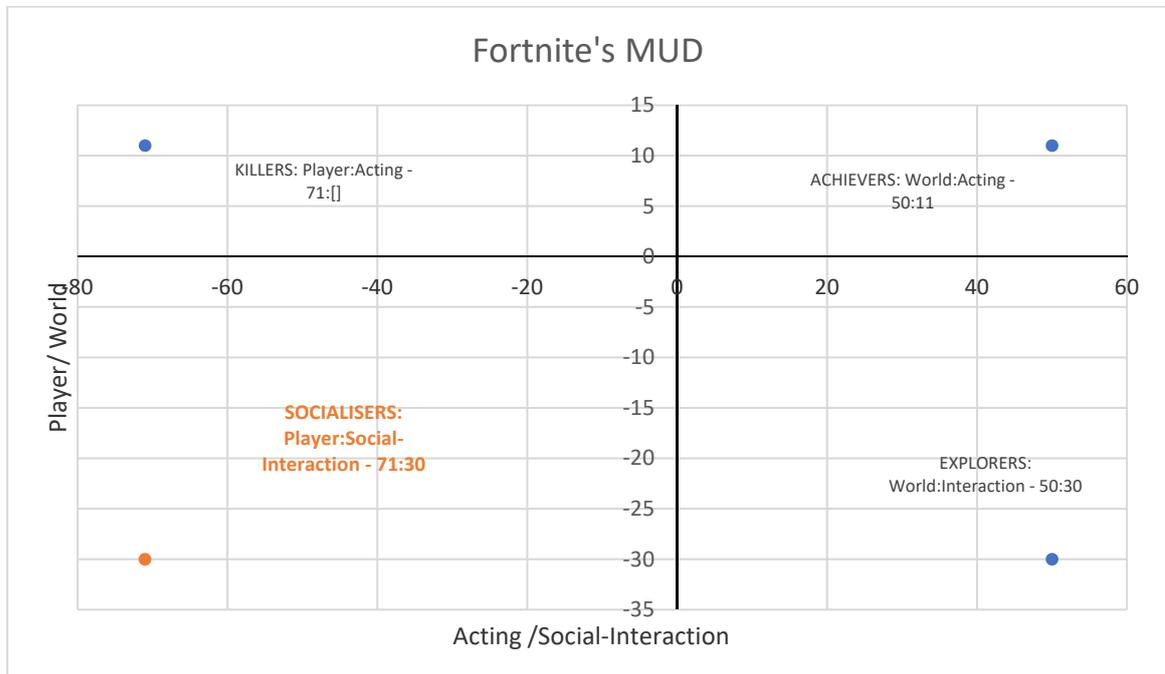


Figure 7. *Fortnite's* player attraction

In sum, I propose two main takeaways for our journey. *Fortnite* was designed to become a TP since it meets Oldenburg's characteristics. This is not merely by design but by experience, since as we have seen, Gen-Zs are changing their SN habits and moving to socialise in *Fortnite*. Furthermore, the game offers more than a mere

gaming environment, it offers a playground of experiences, attracting socialisers. This attraction further emphasises my point that *Fortnite* is not merely a game but a culture, and one where meaning-making becomes a locus where “reflexive spirituality”[72] is formed. Its emphasis on friendship as experiencing fun together highlights a new model for discipleship, one which promotes equality and lived experience. Speaking of friendships, *Fortnite* has widened its doors to attract more females as we shall see in the next sub-section.

2) *Designed gender-neutral*

In an industry which is normally associated with males, *Fortnite* has seen an increase in the appeal towards women, including by using female avatars in its ads, and less gory shootouts[73]. Various results confirm *Fortnite*'s success in attracting females[74]–[77].

Yee speaks of a difference between games which attract women and games *designed with women* in mind. Research shows that 64% of female gamers, as opposed to 38% males, prefer mobile over other platforms[78], and 60% of daily mobile-gamers are women[79]. As one is browsing the Appstore, the first attraction is from the app's icon. *Fortnite* uses no character in its icon, so as to keep its gender-neutrality, and on the website the female to male ratio is biased towards females (13:10)[23].

However, to attract females, it does not mean that the game must only portray females in its advertising, but attract *how* females game. Quantic's[80] research shows that females prefer long-range weapons, which *Fortnite* responds by providing equal types(Figure 8).



Figure 8. Long vs Short range¹³

Summing up this section, I would like to re-iterate two main points. *Fortnite* is not merely marketed to attract a bigger share of the gaming-market by attracting females, but it is designed to do so. The website promotes more female figures, has an equal amount of long/short-range weapons and introduced the mobile platform which is a natural go-to platform for females. This introduces us to the last section under the lens, that of user experience.

3) *User experience*

Bernhaupt's[83] literature review of different methodologies studying UX in games, shows that scholars are interested in measuring: how fun-to-play a game is, and what kind of experience players have during play. Considering the aforementioned statistics, *Fortnite* demands a UX evaluation. I define UX as combining the designed goals and rewards with visuals, audio and interaction perceived by the gamer[84]. This permanent interplay requires consistent evaluation which ultimately impacts the motivational aspect of gameplay.

For my assessment I will be using Korhonen et al.'s[85] taxonomy of Arrasvuori et al.'s[86] Playful Experience (PLEX) framework due to its clear practicality in analysing UX[87]. I believe this framework sits at the intersection between UX and emotional experience. I enhanced the framework with Paavilainen's[87] categories too, which promises to make it a more wholesome PLEX framework. Thus, I identified a list of twenty PLEX categories which were searched for in *Fortnite*.

¹³ Data combined from: [81], [82].

Referring to Table 3, I conclude that *Fortnite* is a PLEX-rich game, demanding further research. Emotions such as ‘Completion’ can drive a pre-disposed personality to become an addict[88], and impede on our God-given freedom. *Fortnite* seems to prefer ‘Competition’ over ‘Collaborative’ experiences in contrast to Consalvo’s[89] research. This is also a counter-Christian idea since we are called to collaborate not compete[90]. This PLEX-richness further enhances my recurrent theme that this game has a strong potential to be a theological formator.

4) *Death*

Finally, we can look at *Fortnite*’s particular thanatological representation. While as we shall see in Chapter IV, permadeath is presented in several games, *Fortnite*’s unique interactive style presents what in my opinion is a quasi-permadeath: death of the avatar, but continuation of the experience.

By way of introduction, allow me to speculate that *Fortnite*’s permadeath presentation has heretical gnostic influence. While the avatar is killed and cannot game anymore, the player is not stopped from interacting and socialising. As we have seen, *Fortnite* is not merely a game, but an SN, and thus, socialising is valued as much as the actual gaming. Hence, a main hypothesis which I will try to answer in the next pages is whether the players feel they remain alive despite being eliminated since their social-interaction remains unchallenged.

D. *Conclusion*

Having reviewed *Fortnite* I conclude that it is fitting to describe it as a culture-setter amongst our youths. Through its cartoonish-environment, it hides violence and cheapens the act of dying, while attracting more varied gamer-demographics: both gender and age (even attracting audiences which are legally prohibited to access traditional SNs), and a different set of players: the Socialisers.

As the quoted scholars have remarked, *Fortnite* is not merely a game, but a TP redefining culture and ultimately redefining who we are. More precisely in relation with this dissertation, our Gen-z’s thanato-theology might be affected. It is in this redefinition that theological understanding is needed.

III. METHODOLOGY

In reviewing *Fortnite* we outlined the importance to see it as a TP for Gen-Zs, where meaning-making is happening, and theology is forged. In this chapter I will be introducing the theories behind my methodology to answer whether and how *Fortnite* is affecting Gen-Z's thanato-theology.

A. *Qualitative approach*

I will be using a qualitative approach which utilises emergent and naturalistic data to examine the why and how of a phenomenon[91]. It is not envisaged to prove the existence of a particular relationship between *Fortnite* and thanato-theology, but rather to describe, if any, the relationships between its representation and the theological understandings[92]. My aim is to allow the data from the open-ended interviews to guide the research, and specifically my theological reflection in Chapter V. I envisage to allow the youths to share the meaning they are attributing to death, and together explore their espoused theology.

1) *Research design*

Using Gregory's[93] methodology of open-ended camera-based interviews, I will be interviewing a group of five Maltese Gen-Z *Fortnite*-players from my parish¹⁴. Because culture is a system of meanings[94], I will allow the informant an opportunity to answer in ways that she feels content with, and not to please me[95]. The interview is designed with guiding open-ended questions (OEQ) that leave room for further questioning based on their response. As I sift through their answers, I will apply Glaser's Grounded theory[96]–[98] to code my notes while allow space for: conceptualising data; and tolerating confusing answers[96].

2) *Data handling*

Interviews began after I received the Ethics approval dated 14th February 2019. After the approval, I contacted an avid player and asked him to recruit another four players from the group. Having explained the research and acquired their(/legal-guardian's) permission for research, I have conducted the interviews via Facebook Chat and recorded using AnyCap. Transcripts were AI-transcribed by otter.ai. All services were password protected, and once I finished using the software, I downloaded back to my password-protected desktop and deleted.

B. *Stages of the interview*

The framework selected for my research is the one proposed by Bosman's[99] four-staged methodology to research religion in games:

¹⁴ <http://marsaskalaparish.org/>.

1. Playing the game because “researching = playing”;
2. Collection of all the in-game information (Chapter II);
3. Mapping the intermedial relationships between the game and other games (Chapter IV);
4. Gathering of data.

The fourth stage is the subject matter of this section. Modelled on Klastrop’s methodology[100], I will ask the players for introductions, analyse how affected by mortality salience (MS) are they, and ask OEQ to study death and death in *Fortnite*. In Figure 9 I have identified five stages in the interviewing process:

- i) Explain the interview and agreement to participate;
- ii) Introduce the player through a series of tests;
- iii) Play one round of BR, where the player is asked to stay in the game until the game is finished;
- iv) Analyse MS and query for self-esteem and worldview to continue building up an introductory profile of the player;
- v) Actual face-to-face interviews which is split into three main stages:
 - a. OEQ about life and death;
 - b. OEQ questions about one’s own death;
 - c. OEQ about *Fortnite*’s thanatological representation.

I ground my methodology on several authors who will be introduced below. A full copy of the transcript of each interview and the demographic introductions can be found in Appendix IV.

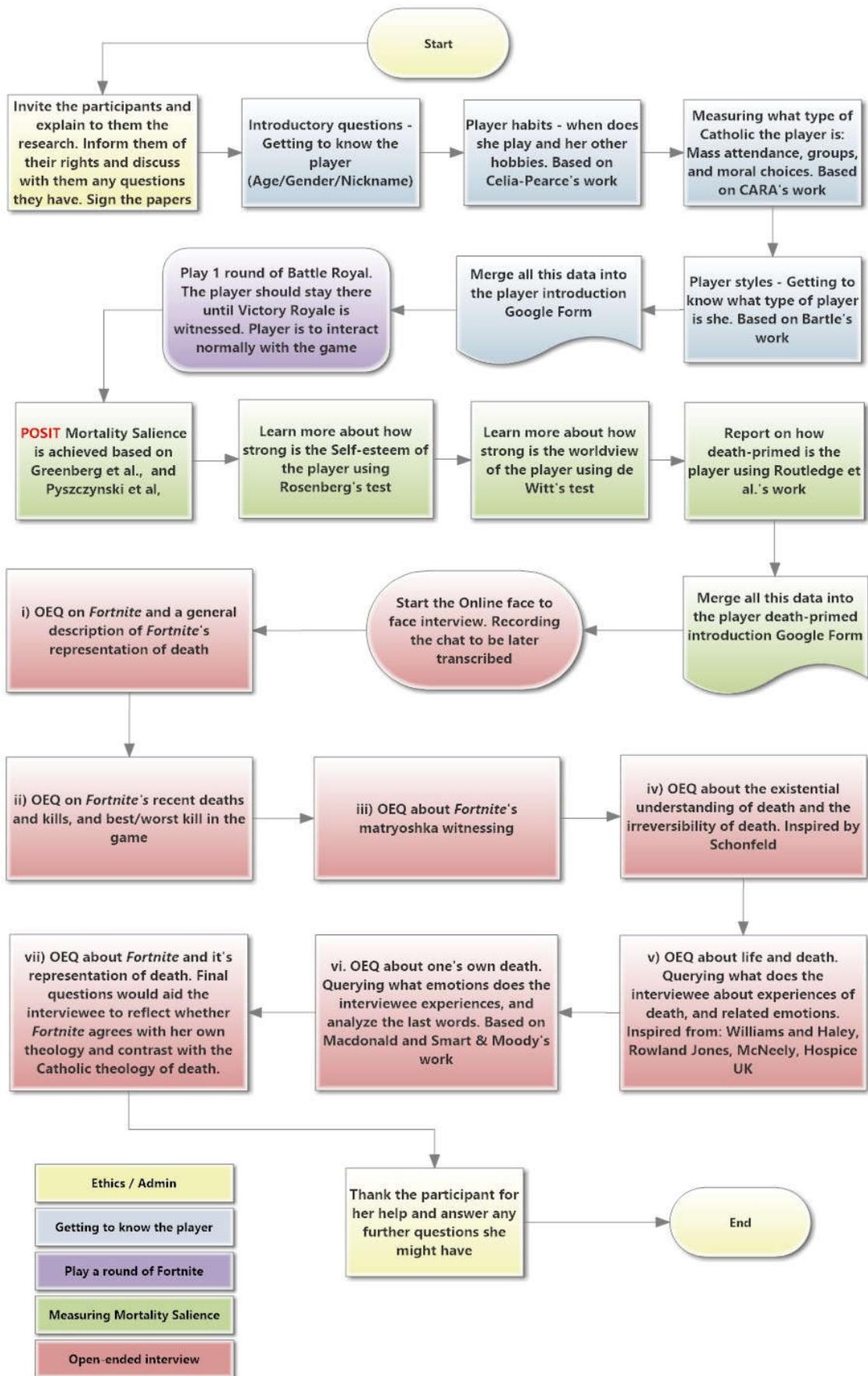


Figure 9. Interviews flowchart

1) *Introductory Questions*

I will start by asking the player to hint at her gaming habits on the agreement that I will not be contrasting her habits with others' but just to give us an idea as readers. Considering that when asked what non-gaming activities they prefer, 81.6%, 62,7% and 59.6% of gamers answered exploring, creating and dancing respectively[101], it is very intriguing to notice that *Fortnite* encapsulates all three. Hence, I will introduce my respondents by asking them about their non-*Fortnite* activities and to discuss their *Fortnite*-gaming patterns and skins[102]–[106].

I will proceed to profile the respondent's Catholicity as per CARA's methodology[107], where students' practice, morality and social thought is measured against the Magisterium.

Finally, I will be rewording Barr's[108] Bartle's player-type taxonomy[69] to make it more relatable to *Fortnite*-players. Understanding the player-type allows us to read the OEQ from the player's perspective.

This analysis is concluded by asking the player to play one round of BR and engage the game by repeating the social-activities she is used to in a typical gaming session.

2) *Fortnite – priming mortality salience*

Anderson theorised that violent video-games (VVGs) induce MS due to distal defence mechanisms (DDM)[109]. Unpacking this theory considering *Fortnite*, three questions emerge:

- a) Is *Fortnite* a VVG?
- b) What is MS?
- c) How is DDM different to proximal defence mechanisms (PDM)?

Fisk describes VVGs as games that “represent violence as the best or only way to resolve conflict”[110]. Considering the BR can only be won by one player who at least has killed another and be the LMS, I conclude that Fisk's categorisation is true. Furthermore, in legal terms, if a game affirms either of the following questions, it is considered a VVG[111]:

- Can the game be considered deviant or morbid to minors?; or
- Does the game allow the player to inflict injury to human-like characters?

Hence, considering that all avatars are human-looking, despite its cartoonish-look, *Fortnite* should be considered as a VVG. Basing my theory on both Fisk and Parker, I conclude that *Fortnite* is a VVG and thus, it increases aggressiveness[112] and possibly induces MS[109].

People become aware of their own mortality by thinking about death, a phenomenon explained as MS[109]. While the inevitability of death is a given, people do not think about death, unless they are under MS[113]. There are two strands of MS-priming: either through a death essay[114], [115], or through subliminal death

priming[116]. Irrespective of the media used, different primes tend to equally produce MS, thus this phenomenon is trans-media[114]. Since *Fortnite* is a VVG, it is posited¹⁵ that it raises MS.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) hypothesizes that MS-induced people attempt to manage MS through two types of mechanisms: PDM and DDM. PDM attempts to push death-thoughts out of conscious awareness through distractions or by convincing the self that the threat is not an immediate problem[117]. After PDM happens, DDM happens at the subconscious level. If one is lab-testing, a time-delay should happen[117], but in gaming, one is distracted[118] and this acts as the buffer to push death thoughts (DT) to the subconscious[109]. Research shows that because of TMT, one tends to strengthen either one's cultural and religious worldview or self-esteem[119]. Thus, merging all the above theories I postulate that *Fortnite* is a VVG, and thus, induces MS through a DDM mechanism. Hence, to better introduce the respondents, I will be analysing their self-esteem and cultural worldviews. To study the foremost, I will be employing Rosenberg's[120] self-assessment scale. De Witt's[121] research proposes four worldviews:

- Traditional: metaphysics as not separate from the profane;
- Modern: secular and materialistic;
- Postmodern: value multiple perspectives on reality; and
- Integrative: synthesise elements from the others.

For both tests, I will be using third-party tools and asking the participants to share only the results which will be used only for introduction purposes.

I will conclude by presenting a list of fragmented words (FW) which they have to complete such as COFF-- [115], [122]. This will assess how mortality-primed they are before we delve into the interviews.

3) *Open-ended questions*

The interview proper will have seven stages as per Figure 9:

- i) Questions related to *Fortnite*, including skins, and discuss with the player their answers to the previous sections;
- ii) Questions related to the game just experienced and using it as a springboard to discuss a memorable kill and death in *Fortnite*;
- iii) Proceed to discuss the matryoshka experience, and try to tease out any relationship with the killer[123];

¹⁵ I cannot conclude without a more thorough quantitative research.

- iv) Tease out existential understandings of death. I will be following the methodology outlined by Willams and Haley[124] and McNeely[125] about discussing death with teenagers. I will be asking whether death is understood as irreversible[126] and to recount the experience of having witnessed someone dying, which is not uncommon in Malta in contrast to what is the case in the West[127];
- v) Tinker with experiences felt during the loss of a loved one. I will be using the Hospice's guidelines[128] and paying attention to normalize the range of emotions while creating space to open;
- vi) Discuss the interviewee's own death[129], asking her to imagine herself able to say some last words to loved ones in different scenarios[129]. Using Macdonald's[130] categories merged with Smartt and Moody's[131] I will be teasing out what these Gen-Zs deem as the most apt way to leave as a legacy. This set of questions would be further enhancing MS[132]; and
- vii) Explore how *Fortnite* represents death and try to merge its representation with one's own understanding of death, and Christian thanato-theology.

C. Conclusion

The foregoing chapter highlights the methodology used in this research, in particular the use of OEQ. The aim of this complex intermesh of literature into a holistic methodology is to explore the relationship between *Fortnite's* qualities and characteristics and how death is experienced in *Fortnite* and in RL.

Games are “nothing if not lovable objects. They are playmates and social enablers [... They are] objects of adoration.” Adoration lost its true sense but here it is understood as “simultaneously to love and to plead, to exalt yet to approach, to hollow and to demand”[133, p. 87]. Only through such an exploration can we speak of *Fortnite* as an object worthy of adoration, through which we demand meaning.

Considering the interviewees participate in the parish's life, they are considered practicing Catholics, but is their existential understanding in line with Catholic theology? Will one of them mention any theological issues with *Fortnite's* representation of death? How can death constitute ‘fun’? The next chapter discusses.

IV. DEATH AND DYING IN GAMING

A. Introduction

When speaking about death, Tocci describes videogame-related scholarly work as mostly focusing on analysing the characters killed by the player and rarely focusing on the death of the player's avatar. Death in this reflection is not considered as "morally problematic or dangerous to audiences, but as an unnecessary narrative disruption due to the typical game structure of trial-and-error, die-and-retry"[134]. Videogames may be the only narrative medium where the player's death is "entirely routine" and often leads to frustration[134] even though they have the theological capacity to trigger existential reflection[135]. While Heidegger speaks of death as concluding the process of *becoming*[136]: "Only in dying can I to some extent say absolutely, 'I am'"[137, p. 222], can we speak of *Fortnite*'s representation of death as meaning-making?

Chapter III showed that the representation of death arouses MS, however it is noted that all respondents responded low on the FW-experiment. While to claim that *Fortnite* does not induce MS, I need a much larger quantitative sample, it is worth highlighting this fact before proceeding.

The aim of this chapter is to theologically engage Bosman's three categories of how videogames portray death, while listening to the participants' voices. In discussing the meaning of each of these ludological mechanisms of avoiding death, I am interested in juxtaposing the apparent fear of death exhibited in games with embracing "sister death"[138] as the gateway to the eternal embrace of totality[139].

B. Narratological Embeddings

The avatar's death in videogames is one of the most prominent feedback systems. Quoting Aarseth, Bosman asserts that death, or its absence, communicates to the player her "(in)ability to achieve" targets embedded in the game[140]. Boston outlines three categories of narratological embeddings (NE), each with further sub-types (Figure 10).

Type	Description	Primary example(s)
1	Embedding: Actual death.	
A.	The player's avatar is replicated by cloning or copying.	<i>Borderlands</i> series (2009-2014)
B.	The player's avatar is replaced by an avatar from a parallel universe.	<i>Bioshock Infinite</i> (2013)
C.	The player's avatar is replaced by a new avatar.	<i>Zombi</i> (2012)
2	Embedding: Death avoided.	
A.	The player's avatar is placed within a simulation context.	<i>Assassin's Creed</i> series (2007-18)
B.	The player's avatar is saved by an external force at the last second.	<i>Prince of Persia</i> (2008)
3	No explicit narratological embedding.	
A.	The player's progress through the game is preserved for next try.	<i>Watch Dogs</i> (2014)
B.	The player's progress through the game is lost.	<i>The Binding of Isaac</i> (2014)

Figure 10. Typology of NEs[140, p. 16]

The Actual death embedding takes death seriously, because the avatar dies. The continuity of play is narratologically safeguarded through cloning (1A); or by bringing in a replacement: either from a parallel universe (1B) or a new avatar altogether (1C). The second category avoids death altogether by using workarounds: either death happening within a simulated environment (2A); or a last-minute help device (2B). The third does away with death. The narrative is either resumed from the last save-point (3A); or start again (3B).

Fortnite's representation of death can be classified as of the latter category as permadeath happens. However, as the interviewees have expounded, the death of the avatar is not the death of the player, and thus due to *Fortnite's* SN-ability, it should be categorised in a fourth category. The player's avatar is killed but a post-mortem experience remains. Before delving into this fourth category, let us engage each of these subtypes.

1) *Actual Death*

a) *Cloning*

In this first category, death happens, but its effects are quickly removed. Bosman highlights *Borderlands*[141] as exhibiting post-mortem cloning of the avatar at a New-U station, which the avatar would have previously passed next to.

One of *Fortnite's* Limited Time Modes¹⁶ (LTM), *Fortnite:Rumble*, exhibits the same behaviour. After the avatar is killed, a new avatar, visibly similar and sporting the same loot pre-kill, drops down from the flying-bus to continue the game.

In this scenario, the narratological similarity between the killed-avatar and the digitally-cloned can easily convince the player that she is playing with the same avatar. To the untrained ear, this description can echo the

¹⁶ LTM are released for a season whereby Epic can experiment with different modes with the game engine. Some features that were featured in the LTMs have eventually made their way into the game[142].

same theology that one experiences in the sacrament of Baptism. Theologically we speak of a new ontological creature[143]. Miller postulates that the neophyte is the same being who experiences “a total change”, and thus, “while it is still you, you are no longer the same”[144]. Zizioulas’ reading of this ontological-baptismal change can be loosely mapped to what is happening in *Rumble*¹⁷ because he speaks of a new mode of existence and regeneration[145]. While similarities are noticeable, a stark ontological difference remains which is aptly highlighted in *Borderlands*: “reconstruction of your original body, which died the first time you respawned”[141]. In Baptism, the old you remains, and changes to the new you.

b) *Parallel Universe*

First person to get 50 kills wins the game. The moment the person dies, [s]he loses all [her] items. And respawns instantly as a different character [without the previous loot]. Always the same amount of people in one lobby. If one person decides [...] to exit the match early, other people [can] join the ongoing lobby [at the expense of starting disadvantaged]

This sub-type is what *Dawn19M*¹⁸ described when asked how he would re-design *Fortnite* to match his theological understanding. Similarly, to 1B, the avatar dies but the old avatar is replaced with another copy from a parallel universe. This way of coping with death relies on the hypothesised existence of a parallel universe. Bosman chose to focus on space-travel (multi-verse) rather than also including time-travel within the same universe in this sub-type. Games such as *Bioshock Infinite*[146] rely on the assumption that it is possible to travel between universes.

What *Dawn19M* is suggesting is that moral responsibility is not world-bound but spans across all “counterparts in the multiverse since they are all part of a Transworld individual”[147, p. 64]. Laas concludes that “identity is a necessary condition for ascribing responsibility”[147, p. 63]. I believe he is right.

¹⁷ After an avatar is killed, in *Rumble*, they respawn and hover back down from the flying-bus. Which team reaches first 150 kills, wins.

¹⁸ *Dawn19M* plays 1-5hrs/pw during term-time with equal amounts for hobbies and friends. He plays 5-10hrs of non-Fortnite gaming and spends 10-20hrs on social networking and studying. He plays mostly during the evenings between 8-midnight. Very similar patterns during holiday times except for reducing studying and increasing other hobbies to 20-30hrs pw. He attends weekly Sunday mass and attends multiple times a month the youth group. Prays 5-15 minutes every day, In the CARA questions he fully agrees with most, agrees with the death penalty and discrimination questions, but disagrees on the Sunday mass and the possibility to pray. Player-types: 59% Explorer, 59% Socialiser, 53% Killer and 29% Achiever. Post Fortnite he had a low self-esteem(8) and Postmodern is the highest worldview and Modern the lowest. His MS-measurement in the FW:0/9.

Christian discussion about identity is tightly knit with the question of free will and morality. Aquinas understood free will as rooted in two spiritual faculties of the intellect and will. This ultimately makes the human an image of God, and thus, called to freedom for excellence[148].

This cheating-death representation is theologically flawed too. It shares much of what was discussed earlier: the new avatar is ontologically different from the deceased one. Holding on to the doctrine that each soul is an individual act of God, I believe that the multiverse replacement is not the same person because God's act of loving-into-being is an individual one[149]. In a many-world interpretation, which I find problematic to believe[150], one can remain alive in other universes even if one dies in the current one. Theologically, I deem this as logically jarring with the current theological understanding spanning from creation, the Paschal mystery and anthropological theology.

c) Next avatar

This narratological variant proposes no obvious theological issues. It confirms the death of the avatar but allows the player to interact with a new avatar which would have been narratologically already present. Games such as *Zombi*[151] are not ludologically espousing permadeath, because the player can scavenge the deceased-avatar for loot and would benefit from the experience gained (such as map exploration) by the deceased-avatar. This subtype features a narratological not ludological permadeath, where "death [is] not avoided, but -again-rendered meaningless"[140, p. 35].

Theologically this thanatological representation is more correct than the previous two but still tends to dilute the existential meaning of death as interpreted by the likes of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Jaspers[152], [153]. Death is represented as a "risk-free" activity similar to other "repeatable activities that occur as part of the *everyday life* in the gameworld" as opposed to being the "ultimate end to our actions and corporeal existence that cannot be repeated"[100, p. 4].

In contrast to presenting death as the very foundation of our existence, let us now turn our attention to the second type, where death is avoided altogether.

2) Death avoided

In this second category, death "is avoided altogether"[140] at the last instance. Bosman offers two scenarios, either through simulation (2A) or a last-minute saviour (2B).

a) *Simulation*

I think you're not actually in the game it is just a hologram (Carmex17M)¹⁹the you is the username (Palmolive16F)²⁰

Carmex17M's hologram representation is based on the fact that when the drone 'sucks up' the hologram into oblivion, there are no apparent setbacks neither to the identity because it is just a matter of restarting another game, nor to the username. He proofs this by declaring that despite that his account can be sold in the thousands, he wants to keep his username, echoing *Palmolive16F*.

Fortnite's perceived anthropological representation by the above respondents is an exemplar of the first style of death-avoidance. This sub-type often comes coupled with a simulation device, such as that found in *Assassin's Creed (AC)*[154]. In *AC* the player's avatar is placed in a simulation device called the *Animus* and re-lives the life of another avatar in a hierarchy of control (Figure 11).

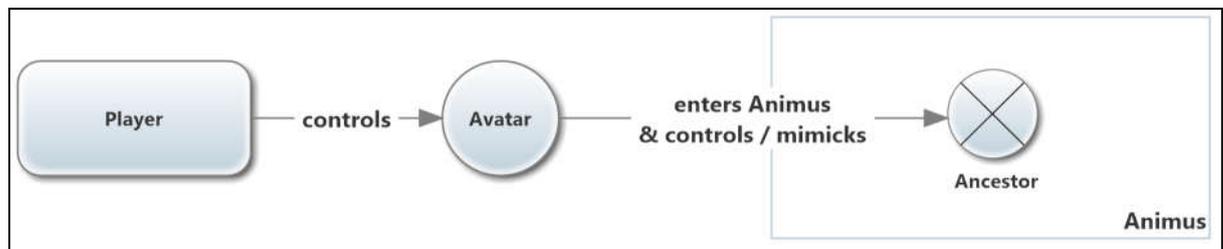


Figure 11. Hierarchy of control in *AC*

If the ancestor dies prematurely, the simulation is 'desynchronised' and the simulation is rebuilt before the fatal incident. This type of death-avoidance mocks death in the sense that narratologically it reduces death to a mere ludological feedback loop which instructs the player to improve her skills.

¹⁹ *Carmex17M* plays 5-10hrs/pw during school time, while dedicating same time for sports and study. Most of his time, 20-30hrs/pw is spent with friends. He plays between 11pm-1am during term-time. He has same patterns during holidays, with a reduction in studying and a slight increase in pleasure reading. He plays mostly 00:00-03:00 during recess period. He attends weekly Sunday mass and attends multiple times a parish youth-group. He spends less than 5 minutes prayer/pd. On the CARA-inspired research, he Agrees/Fully agrees with all statements except 'Undecided' for the death penalty and working towards a just economy. His player-type is 60% killer, 10% achiever, 10% explorer and 20% socialiser. Post-gaming his self-esteem was high (24) and his strongest worldview was Post-modern and lowest: modern. His MS-measurement in the FW: 1/8 words.

²⁰ *Palmolive16F* plays 1-5hrs/pw during term-time and spends the same amount on reading, social-network and other gaming. She spends 5-10hrs with Friends. She games between 9-10pm and on weekends during morning and 9-midnight. During holidays, she reduces sports and reading, and increase non-Fortnite gaming and social-networking. She plays between 11-12am and 10pm-01am every day. She is an every-Sunday mass goer and attends a parish youth-group multiple times a month. She spends 15 minutes of daily prayer. In the CARA-inspired questions on Catholicity she fully agrees with every statement except for 'Agreeing' with the Abortion and the need for the Sunday mass. Her player type: 60% Achiever, 25% Socialiser, 10% Explorer, 5% Killer. Post-game analysis shows that she has a high self-esteem (24) and her world-view is mostly Postmodern and least Traditional. Her MS based on FW was: 3/8.

Furthermore, *Fortnite:Reboot Van* LTM will allow players in Squad-mode to resurrect allies who have been killed, and make them respawn in the area where they were killed[155], essentially totally reversing the effect of death. The teammates need to pick up a ‘Reboot card’ which would have been dropped down by the killed-player. It is interesting that whereas the revival artefact in other MMOGs would be a godly/sacred figure[156], *Reboot-Van* uses a hippie-van, a machine, and a symbol of New Age. Can one postulate that Epic are hinting at a hippie sub-culture with New Age tenants as opposed to structured religions?

b) *External saviour*

While in the first sub-type death happens, in this one, death is avoided altogether. Games such as *Prince of Persia*[157] would feature a last-resort helper which would avoid the last killing blow. Similarly, in *Fortnite:Leave None Behind* the killed-player is immune to further damage, but the heal-over-time effect of the still-alive partner changes to damage-over-time.

I interpret this second category, especially the external saviour, as echoing the transhuman attempt to avoid death at all costs. Pope Francis warns against this theology and speaks of true wisdom exhibited by a palliative child who befriended death and accepted its finality. By so doing, he lived[158]. Gregory translates this theology in gaming: “Instead of worrying about the death or the failure of my character to achieve what the game thought was necessary to win, there was another approach to the game – living”[159, p. 274]. Through her bold acceptance, rather than fearing death, cancer-stricken Gregory experienced that by accepting her avatar’s limits, she learnt to take risks, and enjoyed what the game had to offer. Dixon accuses games exhibiting death-avoidance of robbing the player of reflection on the seriousness yet creatureliness of death in RL. Let us now turn our attention to the third category which espouses no explicit NE.

3) *No Explicit Narratological Embedding*

a) *Death is void*

*there's no separation of who died and who won, [...] you're just a sort of number, I guess.
Because when you win, [a] number increases in your wins [, and] when you die, you just
die (Palmolive16F)*

This is not final like it's a joke [...] death in real life, it's just final. The end nothing more to it[. ...] In Fortnite you just respawn and start again. (Fairy18M)²¹²²

Palmolive16F interprets *Fortnite* as also forming part of this category. She notes that *Fortnite* trivialises death and renders it a 'number'. *Fairy18M* furthers that death is rendered a 'joke' because it just asks you to respawn.

Hence, while at face-value *Fortnite* seems to present a permadeath representation, two interviewees speak of the futility of its death, because if they are playing solo, they tend to exit the current battle and join another. Considering that this category encompasses games which feature no explicit death narrative but enable the player to save her progress and when the avatar is killed, the game is resumed from the last save point, one can postulate that the way these two respondents view *Fortnite* can be classified in this sub-type. In these games, a penalty is sometimes imposed, but it can easily be classified as – at most – a nuisance to the player. Rendering game-death as futile and meaningless jars with RL death.

Comparing such a rupturing event to a (totally) reversible mistake does not do justice to this ontological event. Tocci concludes that trial-and-error videogames propose an illusion of boundless choices in life[134], whereas using games to explore moral choices[160]–[162] “can show us how to grieve, what the value of life is, how to prepare for our death and that of our friends”[163].

*Lux17M*²³, agrees with this pedagogical value of gaming, and speaks of *Fortnite* as:

one game that is trying to help people to understand death. [...] And it's like trying to get people to change maybe their lifestyles and be more careful of how they live

²¹ *Fairy18M* equally plays *Fortnite* and other games 5-10hrs/pw during term-time and enjoys 10-20hrs social-networking, and dedicates 30+hrs for friends. His gaming hours are 7-9pm. During recess period, he increases non-*Fortnite* gaming but keeps the same activities. He rarely goes to mass but attends the parish youth group multiple times a month, albeit he has no prayer life. He agrees to all CARA questions, and fully agrees to the economic and abortion questions. Disagrees with the Sunday precept and is undecided on need to pray. His player type is: 29% Achiever, 59% Explorer, 76% Killer and 35% socialiser. Post-game he had a slightly high self-esteem(19) and had a strongest Integrative worldview and lowest Traditional. His MS-measurement in the FW: 2/9 words.

²² It is interesting that *Fairy18M* believes that it would be possible to revert death in the future.

²³ *Lux17M* plays *Fortnite* around 20-30hrs/pw and other games 30+hrs/pw during term-time and dedicates same time for socialising and sports. His gaming hours are scattered in the afternoon and evening. During recess period, he decreases non-*Fortnite* gaming but keeps the same activities and play *Fortnite* sometimes up to 4am . He goes to mass every Sunday and weekly attends the parish youth group. Prays for 5-15mins daily. He fully agrees to all CARA questions, but only agrees to Christianity as a personal relationship with Christ. His player type is: 29% Achiever, 65% Explorer, 65% Killer and 41% socialiser. Post-game he had a slightly high self-esteem(26) and had a strongest Traditional worldview and lowest modern. His MS-measurement in the FW: 3/8 words.

b) *Permadeath*

death [is] more realistic because once you're dead there's no one that [...] revive you again;

once you're dead, you can't bring back your life.

Only *Lux17M* categorises *Fortnite* in this sub-type. In his answers, he shows that he is a firm believer of the permanency-representation of death. The last category involves the ludological concept of permadeath. Games such as *The Binding of Isaac*[164] allow for a few tries, and the player is then forced to restart the game. Bosman argues that in this subtype, death is far from meaningless, even though the game would offer an “endless amount of retries” in contrast to death’s permanency[99].

When asked what he would change in *Fortnite*’s thanatological representation, he went further to describe that it should represent death more accurately and ‘slowly’. He furthered that he would add a:

slight white light [which] gets brighter [...] appearing] from the middle of the screen. And then that's it. And even maybe having your body still lying on the floor?

The three themes here-presented of dying ‘slowly’, ‘white light’ and ‘corpses’ are all nuanced. When questioned about his own death, *Lux17M* spoke of “sleeping and not wak[ing] up”, a wish shared by *Palmolive16F*. A firm believer in afterlife, he described God as a white light, which is very telling considering he wants to add the white light perspective in *Fortnite*. ‘Corpses’ lying on the floor is a contended theme. While for *Lux17M* it adds to the reality of the game, *Carmex17M* spoke of the sacrality of the corpse which should be covered and treated with respect. A mid-way between these two points could be the erection of tombstones such as those in *World of Warcraft*[165].

Some indie-games have ventured past permadeath and two games pioneered the idea of perma-permadeath: *Upsilon Circuit*[166] and *One Life*[167]. Unfortunately, both ended up defaulting[168]. This genre understands the death of the avatar as fatal: the player cannot play the game again.

Permadeath asks the player to value life, to reason and to make the best judgement to be successful yet safe. Acknowledging the subjectivity of the law of death, the uniqueness of the event can only be transformed through Christian hope. Hence, while game (perma-)permadeath acknowledges the existentially scandalous event of dying, it lacks the Resurrective-ontological transformation.

4) *Summary*

This section teased out philo-theological underpinnings between each of the three categories of representing death in videogames. Issues such as cloning would raise existential and anthropological questions; replacement

from a parallel universe jeopardises identity and ensoulment; and next-avatar would trivialise such an existential event. The second category espouses theological issues in seeing death as avoidable rather than embraceable due to the Paschal-salvific event. Thus, creating counter-mechanisms to avoid death, influence counter-Christian values. The third category espouses the philosophical scandal of death but avoids seeing it as a “good thing, inasmuch as it is for us the beginning and the way of changing for the better”[169, Para. 6.2].

C. *Thanatological humour*

Death is not serious as in real life (Dawn19M)

It's funny. How silly death can be (Fairy18M)

Both quotes are a clear exemplar of Thorson’s laughing at our own mortality[170]. Through humour, the player suspends belief and detaches herself from the violence exhibited in the game. Durkin sees humour as the quintessential example of this detachment because humour acts as a defence mechanism allowing anxiety-coping associated with dying[171]. Durkin suggests that the more we are exposed to death, especially through the lens of humour, the more we reduce our anxieties and accept this scandalous phenomenon.

Fortnite is rich in thanatological humour. *Palmolive16F* describes death as irrelevant because whatever the outcome of the game, ‘you’re just a sort of number’. Furthermore, all respondents recounted their *Fortnite*’s worst death experience laughing at the experience and speaking in terms of a glitch:

- *Fairy18M*: stuck his plunger to the wrong tree and ended out in the killer-storm;
- *Lux17M* and *Dawn19M*: fell off a building;
- *Palmolive16F*: sniped while hovering;
- *Carmex17M*: glider clipped a building;

kind of lowers the [...] expectation of [...] the difficulty and the [...] scariness that's kind of dying;

you know, like, expectation wise, you expect to not make it to the Victory Royale

Fairy18M’s describes *Fortnite*’s representation of death as a ‘joke’ because of its ubiquitous presence. Durkin and Bryant confirm *Fairy18M*’s theory and note that inordinate amount of attention afforded to thanatological themes in pop-culture helps to desensitize us[172].

Marovich notices a similarity in Saint Francis’ canticle. He creature-ises “sister death” by making it a means through which we can comprehend our immortality[173]. Quoting Dastur, she argues that through playing with

death, Francis is taming the Heideggerian anxiety and offers a new joyful theological understanding of 'Sister Death'. Death essentially becomes the "very foundation of our existence"[174, p. 44].

While it may be argued that *Fortnite* attempts to bring a *fun* understanding of death, while watering down our thanatological understanding, *Fortnite* presents another issue not yet tackled in our reflection. Death is not presented as the 'ultimate' (*Fairy18M*) existential event but as a mere change of experience.

D. *Post-mortem experiences*

(I): So you said [that] when you're playing with your friends you try to[...] extend your game by helping them win their game? And in the meantime, you socialise and speak about random stuff?

Palmolive16F: Yes Exactly [...] Thinking about your after the game or between games, talk about anything. I mean, sometimes even our parents come [...] over and they start talking to each other.

In *Fortnite*'s post-mortem socialising, which at times involves her parents joining in, *Palmolive16F* often tries to help her teammates win the game, although she acknowledges that her 'game is finished':

For them, because for me, the game is finished, because I can't do anything, only experience

Fairy18M added:

So if it's [RL friends...], it's mostly chit-chat and ongoing things in the game.

And:

in squads, seeing your teammates keeping the fight going, [...] can be fun, because [...] you can [still] assist, [...] you can see someone that they haven't seen from their screens, maybe someone whose far away [...]. So it's fun to still be helpful. [...] To communicate, [...] it's fun to [be] possible to keep the conversation going even after you die, you can still speak to the rest of the team

Dawn19M, who plays 'for fun', furthers:

[In] squads you [...] watch only [those] that are still alive [and not] the ones that died. [...] I mean, people say that [deceased] relatives [...] are watching [over] them from heaven. [...] And [in Fortnite this] is more obvious, since the person that is still alive can hear you. But in life, I [...] feel that the person not so much as hears you but feels you since some people say that [...] your consciousness [... is] affected by third parties, like [...] dead relatives

Comparing this post-mortem experience to heaven, *Dawn19M* notes that although the avatar is killed, the player is still able to help her teammates, and the ‘fun’-experience is extended post-mortem. He likens this experience to the soul, which as Catholics we speak of as the communion of the heavenly souls who intercede for us during our journey. He highlights a stark difference: in life we ‘feel’ the saints helping us, in *Fortnite* the teammates ‘hear’.

The above theology is further spelled out by both *Carmex17M* and *Lux17M*, although they refrain from linking the ‘peace’-enjoying souls to assisting us. However, it must be noted that both have spoken of praying the intercession of their deceased relatives:

*maybe the soul gets lifted from the player, and is able to see what other people are doing.
Maybe in heaven you get to see what people are doing below*

and:

*The soul can see everything [...], once you're next to God you can see all over the world[:]
picturing the world but from a different perspective*

The above reflections help us further understand that *Fortnite* offers the player more than a mere TPS but an SN where collaboration and sharing of experiences allow the game to both create a new world for the player and also destabilise the one known so far[156]. This can be mapped against what the respondents answered when questioned whether they think technology can reverse death[126]. While three answered in the negative, they answered that they would revive a person if possible.

Carmex17M wanted to revive his grandpa, but then acknowledged that he is happy that his grandpa ‘is with God’. Similarly to *Lux17M*, he is a strong believer in afterlife. *Lux17M* acknowledged that technology can only prolong life but not reverse death.

Contrary, *Fairy18M* believes that through technology we can post-mortem reverse death through mind-uploading:

most likely as someone dying and then transferring the consciousness.

However, when I asked him whether he would want to be revived, he replied:

The world isn't exactly a fun place at the moment. So not right now.

Dawn19M adds that technology can reverse the effect of death, albeit at an expense.²⁴

I don't think if we have the technology to bring the person back to life, the person would forget that [s]he died [... and] that would affect somehow how [s]he will live on again

In sum, while *Fortnite*'s thanatos-ludological representation forces the player to quit the battle arena if her avatar is dead, the experience differs. I interpret this thanatological representation of permadeath as a fourth category, where the experience of fun outlives death. As I have been developing through this dissertation, it is becoming more evident that *Fortnite* is more than a game, but an SN, where the fun experience outlives the avatar's death.

E. *Conclusion*

The quotes above highlight that the respondents understand death as an existential interruption despite its frequent depiction in games as ludologically neutral. However, *Fortnite*'s prolonged post-mortem experience might challenge this idea. Through manipulating the experience of 'fun', the onto-thanato-theological understanding is being challenged. Stemming from the interviews and this chapter I identify three main themes which will be further developed in the next chapter.

Fortnite has an extraordinarily strong fun element, as described by its developers and the interviewed players. This begs the exploration of a theology of fun.

Secondly, it is worrying that despite their Catholic upbringing, respondents have been pollinated with non-Christian theology. In the next chapter I will be theologically engaging the espoused respondents' reincarnation theology.

Given the single act of creation, and the soteriological Paschal event, we are called to value our freedom and not "fear death like an animal"[175, Para. 87] but embrace it as the 'sister' she is[173]. This introduces us to the third theme of Rahner's positive theology of death, with particular reflection on the pancosmic theology which may be hinted by *Fortnite*'s post-mortem SN experience.

²⁴ It must be highlighted that his thanatological understanding is flawed because he believes in reincarnation and acknowledges he has lived other lives while accepting reversal of death and prays for the repose of the deceased.

V. FUN, ONE LIFE AND 'SISTER DEATH'

In the previous chapter, three interrelated themes have been identified: fun, reincarnation theology as opposed to the Christian theology of one life, and a positive outlook on death. In this chapter I will be exploring each of these themes.

A. Fun

This is not final [...] it's a joke

The above quote by *Fairy18M* summarises what all respondents in one way or another commented on *Fortnite's* capability to reshape violence in a fun way. He furthers:

It's funny. How silly death can be.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, *Fortnite's* fun-element is a very grounding principle. *Fairy18M* furthers that he prefers it over other BR-games because it is

a lot more fun. In terms of content updates, [i]t's updated a lot. [A]lways something new to try always something new to test.

and:

It's more fun to play even with friends. It's a lot more casual

By continuously introducing new skins, new LTMs and events, *Fortnite* keeps re-creating a fun atmosphere. Coupled with post-mortem socialising and with 'keeping the fight going' (*Fairy18M*), one can postulate that *Fortnite* is espousing a theology of fun which is not shattered by death.

Humoristic elements could be noted as the respondents were answering their best kill and worst death, especially in the latter. However, a more sombre atmosphere was observed as they recounted witnessing someone dying and discussing their emotions after losing a loved one. That humour has healing qualities particularly in rough patches is no secret, but can we speak of a theology of fun as eschatological?

Boellstorff speaks of the information age as becoming "the gaming age, and thus [...] gaming and its associated notions of play could become master metaphors for a range of human social relations"[176, p. 21]. Thus, we can speak of witnessing a fun revolution, which when paired with Berger's "argument from play"[177] becomes 'sacred time':

One aspect of play [... is...] that play sets up a separate universe of discourse, with its own rules, which suspends, 'for the duration', the rules and general assumptions of the 'serious' world. [... In] playing, one is on a different time [...] Joyful play appears to suspend, or bracket, the reality of our 'living towards death'

In other words, gaming can be considered as transcendental, and is a form of a spiritual experience. Hugo Rahner develops this idea and speaks of fun-playing as evoking religious symbolism where God becomes a player and the church as the community of play[178]. His 'theology of play' is rooted in participation of God's freedom and God's own playing *ad intra*, as Gregory Nazianzen muses:

For the Logos on high plays, stirring the whole cosmos back and forth, as he wills, into shapes of every kind[179]

Hence, Miller notes that a post-lapsarian understanding of labour is void of play, but pre-Fall labour, was as playful as games are[180]. In the 'serious business'[14] of playing, *Homo Ludens* retrieves the gaiety[178], and sacramentalises the 'Artisan Father'[181]. Similarly so, Plotinus had depicted play as a *theoria* journeying towards the beatific vision[182].

But play suffered a metamorphosis. Before the eighteenth century 'fun' derived from the verb 'fon' - making a fool of oneself. Heddendorf speaks of this foolish attitude in a negative sense and associates it with escapist undertones[183]. However in fooling around, in clowning, Nouwen reminds us that we are sharing the very weaknesses which make us so human[184].

Another twentieth-century transformation describes fun as a mundane activity which breaks taboos or belittles them[183]. Hence, can we postulate that *Fortnite* is breaking the taboo of death?

Moulins-Beaufort notes that our "social relations are governed mainly by the search for pleasure"[185], which Heddendorf labels as moving from fact to feeling[183]. However, while Heddendorf shuns fun, Moulins-Beaufort notes that we have "a duty to evangelise this new world"[185]. Hence, a theology of fun opposes hedonistic ideas which are self-centred but opens us to the other. Considering we are created playful[14], and the enjoyment of the senses is seen as a God-given gift that reveals that we are created for "happiness, heavenly beatitude and eternal joy"[186], we can speak of a fun-loving God because God is a relational being[187]. Amstutz theorises that all relationships are founded on playful-fun and hence, one can posit that part of our *imago Dei* is the nature to play, which through death is transformed to eternal playing with God.

The Scripture is inundated with commands to seek fun, because through fun "a sacred meaning is bestowed on secular life"[183, p. 169]. In Genesis we encounter God inviting humans to feast their senses in the garden created by the "Author of inexhaustible joy who created [us] for happiness in all its fullness"[186]. Later, in the

desert we meet God ordering several festivals for post-labour enjoyment. Food festivals are elevated to liturgy and heaven is promised as a feasting banquet. Thus, fun becomes eschatological, for in playing we not only enjoy the present moment but anticipate the promised-Joy. When we are opened to the other, recreation becomes *re-creation*, where we participate in the Sabbath's nurturing and resting in God.

Fairy18M and *Dawn19M*, highlighted the fun-element in both *Fortnite* and their gameplay. The latter has also been nuanced by the other three too. Hence, to different degrees, all five participants see the game as recreational fun. In this recreational space, they are participating in the Sabbath, and in its anticipation of the ultimate rest promised by the sanctuary (Ex 31). In the synoptic healings of a non life-threatening condition on a Sabbath we see a sure sign of the proclamation of the *euangelion* 'to the poor', a central identity in Christ's mission[188]. Gamers, through their fun-gameplay, are participating in Christ's evangelisation mission by participating in the Sabbatical rest. Echoing Ratzinger's claim that the "deepest poverty is the inability of joy"[189], gaming, when it is social – and as we have seen *Fortnite* is built social – can be seen as a *missio Dei* participant. What is at face value deemed as hedonistic frippery can actually be transformed into gospel.

[Fortnite] is developed to be [...] helpful for younger people [...] If one wants to cope [...] through some emotions, I think it would be a good way to bring those emotions [in play]. I think it is actually a good way to represent how a person can deal with anger management, especially. (Dawn19M)

This gospel attitude comes with a warning. Fun needs to remain therapeutic, and should not be sought because it is prohibited and exciting in itself[183]. Heddendorf sees fun "at the polar extreme from faith. Where faith sees order, fun wants disorder. When faith focuses on the transcendent, fun focuses on the imminent"[183, p. 143]. He thus concludes that without faith, fun cannot be sacred. Else, fun soothes technocratically the troubles of life[183]. Thus, hope-rooted sacred-fun can help us transcend to playfulness and freedom of imagination as opposed to happiness-rooted secular-fun, where we are lowered to the world.

In a spectacle of skins and 'cartoonish' and 'childish' (*Dawn19M*) looks, *Fortnite* becomes a place for spectator participation as much as the cathedral had been a place of awe and worship[183]. Considering that "in the beginning was the Word, but in the end it will be the Image"[190, p. 3], can we speak of *Fortnite* as inspiring imagination and fun? In reply, Heddendorf quotes three avenues:

- Look *at* pop-culture to find the orthodox meaning *within* it[191];
- Look *to* pop-culture as a means of expressing orthodox religious meaning for the masses who look *at* it to find meaning[192];

- Look *through* pop-culture which acts as a filter that hides traditional meaning from view and *substitutes* another[193];

However, inspired by *Daisy19M*'s description, I add a fourth:

I always compare [Fortnite] more to life [...] It feels like [...] selecting between what is most needed and important for the end game which is similar [to] real life. In life, [it is] like you gather experiences and opinions and you [...] choose what is important [...] to enjoy a long and nice life

Hence, considering *Fortnite*'s TP aura it is a catechetical space, where by socialising in a 'fun' atmosphere, the player can retrieve a sense of therapy (*Daisy19M*) and be opened to the other. It can be deemed as an exemplar of a "field hospital"[194] where the Church goes beyond the confined ambit of religion[195] and accompanies the world in its need for healing[196]. *Daisy19M* looks *through* pop-culture to see how the Divine Wisdom is working through it and *invites* us to *co-play* with Her, akin to what Maximus the Confessor describes as the Logos' playing with creation[197].

The Christian is called to become a child again, and thus to play for fun: "The end will be even as the beginning – an eternal childhood"[178, p. 63]. Thus, I argue that in playing, the gamer is participating in the eschatological dance before her own death, what Julian of Norwich calls 'eschatological-pleasure'[198].

Hence, I conclude that through *Fortnite*'s fun the player can transform frippery into participation in the eschatological hope while living the gospel. While this is good news for the social-gamer who plays *Fortnite* as a re-creative game and as a TP to socialise with RL friends, it comes at an expense. Two of the five interviewed have espoused reincarnation theology. *Palmolive16F* weaves reincarnation with *Fortnite*, begging further theological investigation.

B. Reincarnation

Fortnite does not teach you to value life because you're still going to be playing the same game as the worst player that there could ever be[...] life is a game. But it's not that sort of game. You only get one shot at playing, [...] reincarnation [...] makes a lot of sense in my mind [b]ecause [of] the fact that you have a chance to live a good life. (Palmolive16F)

'Achiever'-*Palmolive16F*'s theological understanding is quite difficult to understand from a few sentences. She has mashed several theological ideas to create her thanato-theology which is summarised below:

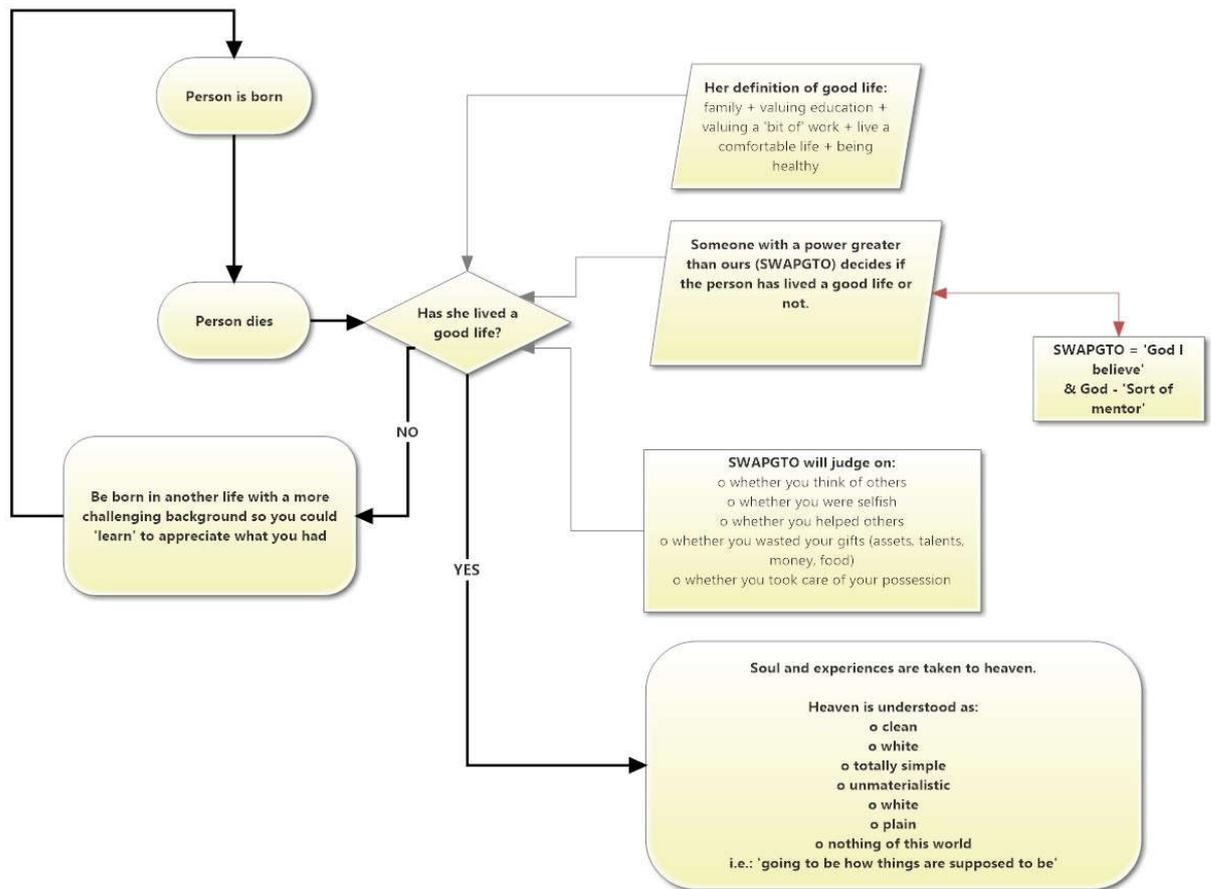


Figure 12. *Palmolive16F's* eschatology

Her eschatology includes a 'god' although only seen as a 'sort of mentor', despite her prayer-life. 'Social-Explorer'-*Dawn19M* has a different eschatological understanding, albeit it too includes reincarnation.

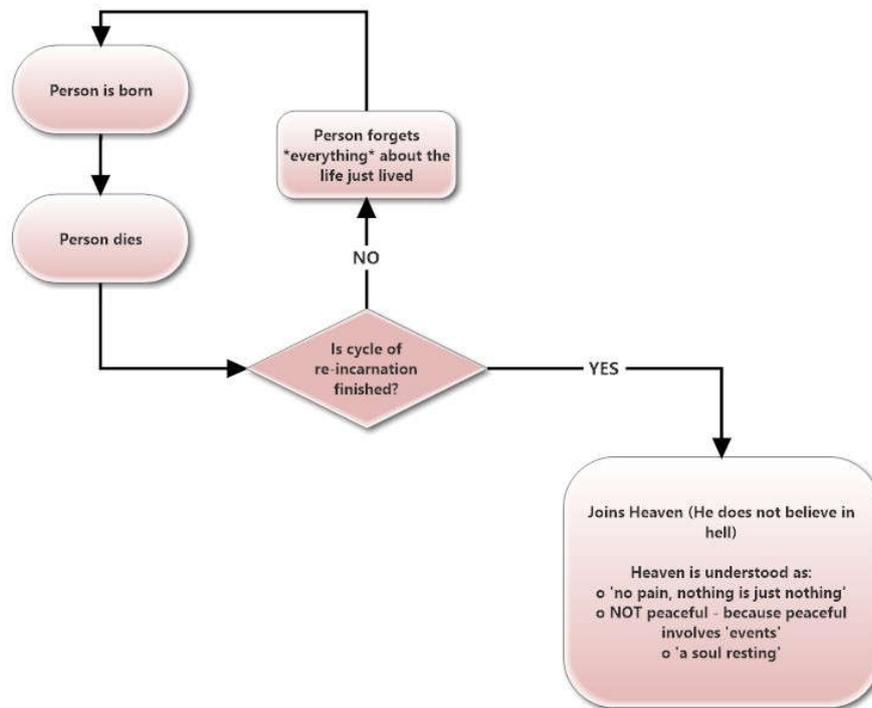


Figure 13. *Dawn19M's* eschatology

In *Dawn19M's* cycle, 'god' is absent although he fleetingly refers to people attending in their consciousness to deceased relatives and god, so presumably he does believe in the existence of a god. Given the above positions, it is worth challenging this reincarnation theology, and exploring how these youths can proclaim with *Lux17M*:

I think that once you are dead, you [...] go meet God and keep on living. Next to him. You are dead from the world. Your body is dead, but your spirit is not

Lux17M's theological understanding of God is more positive than *Carmex17M's*, although both understand that God is the sole master of fate:

God decides if you go to heaven or hell based on our actions during our time here

Catholic Malta is heavily influenced from Saint George Preca's²⁵ theology. Members of his society are responsible to most of our catechism and thus his theology shaped our pop-theology. Camilleri claims that Preca had Jansenist underpinnings[199], and the beatification-biography issued by the Vatican highlights his strong views of a transcendent God and "persuasively illustrated how ugly sin was. He never shied away from openly preaching about death, judgement, hell and heaven"[200]. Furthermore, he urged his catechists to repent of their

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Preca.

sins four times a day[201]. This fearful theology has permeated our popular theology, and often, Maltese confess their fear of God's judgement.

It is no surprise then that these youth would allow reincarnation theology to influence them, and de-personalise God to postpone God's judgement. A personal observation on the local theology shows that we tend to live our faith through moral obligations, and we lack dogmatic discourse and adult catechesis. Although this research is not aimed at offering a Christian-barometer of Malta, the CARA-inspired results highlight my observations, especially with moving away from the Agree towards the Disagree in matters related to a personal relationship with Christ (Figure 14). Prayer-life is not strong either (Figure 15), although all but one attend the weekly Sunday mass. This further indicates that as Maltese, our religion is more moral than relational-centred.

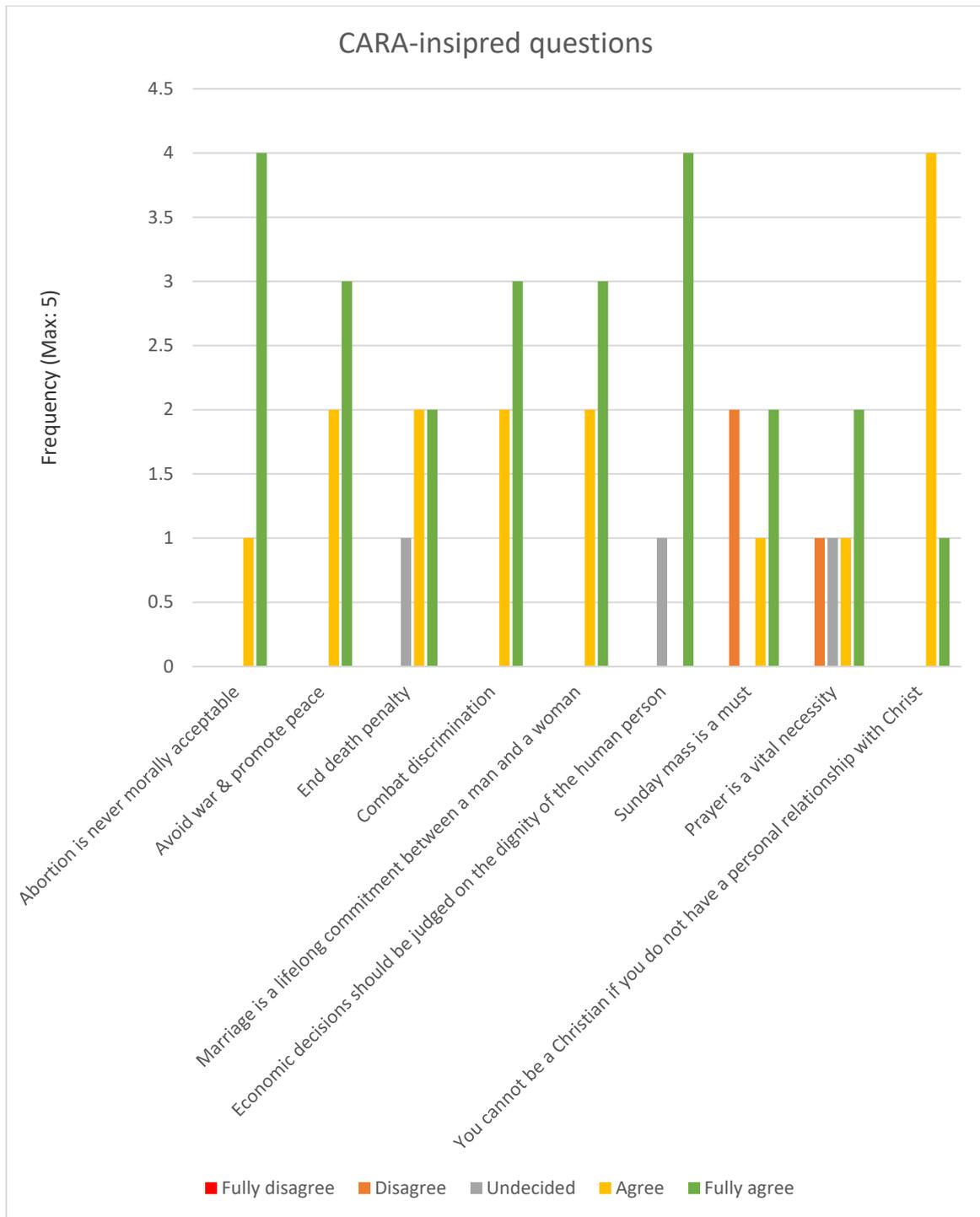


Figure 14. CARA-inspired questions

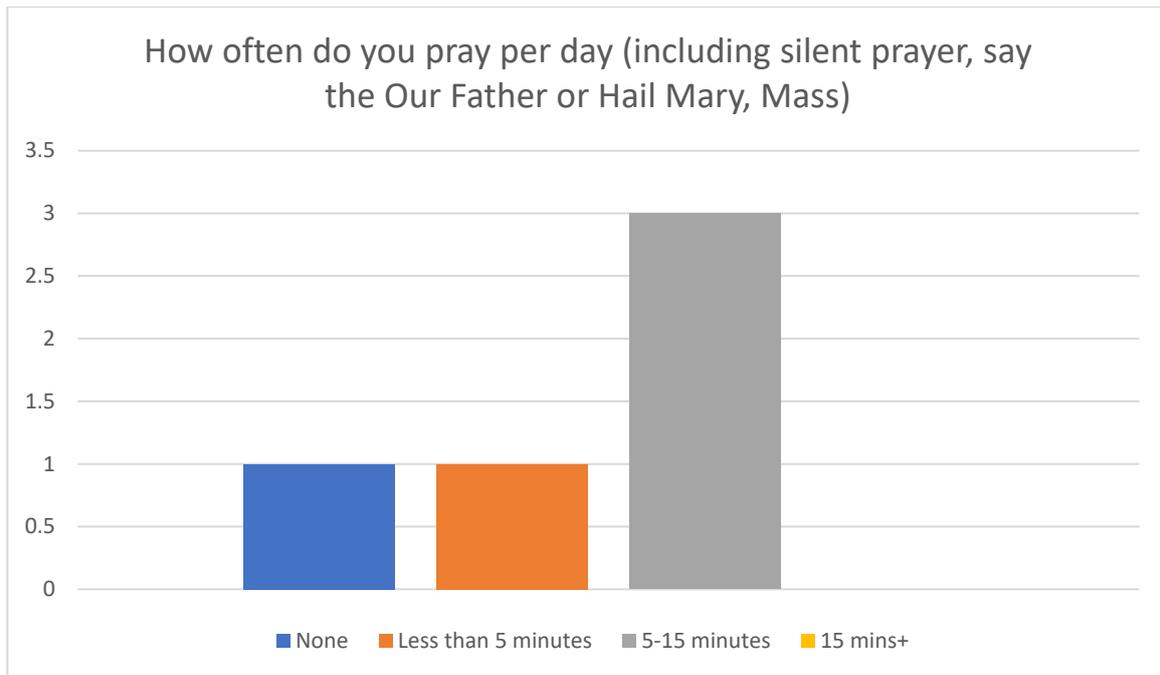


Figure 15. Prayer life

This reincarnation phenomenon is not limited to Catholic Malta. Twenty-four percent of Catholic Americans believe reincarnation is possible[202]. Even ‘Christian’ variants have embarked on this false theology, quoting Matt 11:14 as their proof, despite Elijah appearing with Moses in the Transfiguration (Matt 17:3). Some would claim that Jesus suggested another lifecycle to Nicodemus (John 3:3), but it is aptly evident Jesus is speaking of the new Spirit-induced-creation through the *anochen* (3:1,5)[203]. To refute any doubt, scripturally one can refer to Heb 9:27: “it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement”²⁶.

Reincarnation is not only refuted scripturally but also theologically[204, Para. 1013]. Reincarnation is normally upheld by a pantheistic view of god, and thus, speaks of an impersonal and universal god[205], which is what *Daisy19M* hinted by his definition of heaven as a place of ‘nothingness’ and devoid of God (Figure 13). Let us now turn to another caveat.

forget[ting] everything about this life. And we’[ll] just reborn again [...] but we don’t know our past life

The above definition by *Daisy19M* also jars with eastern karma law which teaches that one’s thoughts, words, and deeds have an ethical consequence, fixing one’s path in future existences[206]. Eastern reincarnation is also

²⁶ NRSVACE version.

tied with the law of *samsara* which sees one working out her way to attain unity with the divine. *Daisy19M* does not offer an escape from his *samsara* cycle.

*sort of being reborn [and] depends on what kind of life you live[d]. If you live a good life:
you go in a 'better place' and finally go to heaven. [...Else:...] you get another shot at
[making a] better life*

Palmolive16F's understanding sees one life impeding on the other, until 'the good mentor' judges that one lived a good life. These understandings can be attributed to a 'New Age' understanding of Christianity. This 'New Age' theology features in many games and Allison highlights a perpetual transformation which "extends into the cyber frontier [and] promises companionship and connectedness, albeit in a commodity form"[207]. In Catholic understanding, this theology was condemned since Patristic times[208]: Irenaeus' denial of transmigration of souls[209, Ch. 2:33]; and Tertullian's questioning the logical fallacy as to why souls shouldn't return to their previous bodies[210, Ch. XLVIII].

Kerper outlines a strong dualistic undertone in reincarnation theology[211], which is very evident in *Fortnite*. Through the centuries, philosophy has toiled to discuss the human as a "spiritual entity" or "consciousness" with little to no connection with the body.

*then find your body in the next game.[...The] Soul will take the same you because you and
skins are like changing clothes (Palmolive16F)*

*once you are dead a robot comes in and like scans you and put you back in the lobby[,
there] is not an actual corpse (Carmex17M)*

*most of the other games, after you die the body is still on the ground. And there is blood
and the usual normal things. But in Fortnite the [...] moment the character dies, it
disappears (Dawn19M)*

The above quotes show that *Fortnite* is interpreted as gnostic. However, in Genesis, God blows His breath into the body causing human life. This act is simultaneously material and spiritual. In becoming *sarx*, the Logos became "fully and permanently human", which then in His resurrection, He resurrected as a whole person[211]. But, if Wittgenstein speaks of the body as "the best picture of the human soul"[212] and Fraser speaks of humanity as defined by embodiment, *Fortnite* opts to devalue embodiment.

This dualism is a phenomenon espoused in other MMOGs. *World of Warcraft (WoW)* presents the avatar's soul roaming a parallel universe in search of its corpse. This is highlighted by "release the spirit" prompts after death, which shows that there is a separation between the body and the spirit at the moment of death, echoing dualism[213]. In this meta-world, only spirits are visible and recognisable. This post-death-world is neither a

welcoming place nor a resting place. Akin to Sheol, it is the place where the dead are dead, inert, lifeless and engage in no activity[214]. Daisy19M defines this lifeless-afterlife as ‘nothingness’. But *Fortnite*’s post-mortem differs from *WoW*. This ‘nothingness’ is not present in *Fortnite* because the player outlives the life of her avatar, in *post-mortem* socialising.

C. *Post-mortem afterlife?*

people say that [their dead] relatives [...] are watching [over] them from heaven. [...] And [in Fortnite this] is more obvious, since the person that is still alive can hear you (Dawn19M)

extend your game by helping them win their game. And in the meantime, we socialise and speak about random stuff (Palmolive16F)

The soul can see everything [...] once you're next to God you can see [...] over the world. So say you are picturing the world but from a different perspective (Lux17M)

If there is an afterlife, it can be metaphorically compared to someone taking your soul and I don't know putting you in heaven or something or hell (Fairy19M)

Perhaps the strongest theological influence *Fortnite* might inspire the youth with, is that death is not final. While Fairy18M speaks of *Fortnite*’s representation as ‘a joke’ because it ‘is not final’, it can be argued that what *Fortnite* is portraying is a change in the mode-of-experiencing fun rather than a permadeath as outlined in chapter IV.

Games tend to represent a counter-Christian theology of vulnerability. As one proceeds in the game she becomes stronger, and in MMOGs, the higher the level, the higher the esteem by the community. However, in Genesis we find that the fullness of the *imago Dei* is found in vulnerability[156]. We are created fragile creatures, and called to collaborate, as opposed to the technological lording of creation. We are called to represent God, and thus co-steward creation and not dominate[215]. However, post-lapsarian death shattered the good creation, and we learnt that even as we are living, we are dying. As mortality salience increases, we crave power[216].

But as a counter model, the Church presents us the vulnerable icon of the Cross as the way to deal with our *prolixitas mortis*. Rather than looking inwards and finding the power within our self-esteem and worldview[109], [115], [118], [122], [217]–[219], we are called to evaluate death through the baptismal lens and remember our participation in Christ’s death and call to the newness of life (Rom 6:4). Thus as Rahner claims, “life is changed not ended”[175, p. 35].

Rahner hinges his thanato-theology on the anthropological understanding that we are ontologically free; historical; and relational[220]. Death is at the heart of all three, and thus, death cannot be suffered passively but must be approached as a human act[175]. Being an act, along the centuries the Church has prepared its faithful to train their *ars morendi*: the art of accepting one's mortality, embracing it, taming fear and achieving maturity[221]. Hence, death becomes both a 'natural' and a 'personal' act, whence it hits the whole person, in body and soul[220]. For Rahner, the soul is made up of material from the cosmos, because it needs to share a relationship to the whole of which the body is a part[220], and at death it is released from the body and is free to "engage via this unitive aspect of our cosmos, with all that exists in a 'pancosmic' way"[222].

*maybe the soul gets lifted from the player, and is able to see what other people are doing.
Maybe in heaven you get to see what people are doing below you on earth*

Carmex17M's theological interpretation is a form of this interpretation. 'Pancosmicity' is understood as the state of the soul prior to the *eschaton*. In this state, the person may already enjoy the beatific vision, albeit the soul is separated from the body. Only at the *eschaton* is the fullness of perfection reached when the soul is united with the resurrected body[175]. In the resurrected state we retain a pancosmic relationship with the universe because it was the locus of our experiences and identity. Hence, our identity is forever linked with our universe, as was Jesus', post-resurrection.

kind of lowers the expectation of the difficulty and the scariness [...] of dying

Fairy18M's insight shows that *Fortnite* normalises and, thus, through fun, creaturises death[173]. In a Rahnerian way, *Fortnite* reminds the player that every moment is a participation in one's death. Thus, positively we can reflect on the pre-lapsarian state where death is peacefully conceived as one's acceptance of God's self-communication[223], rather than the 'no' which stems from futile self-absorption.

Fun in Fortnite remains after death (Fairy18M)

In sum I argue that *Fortnite* presents players as embarking on Bunyan's allegorical pilgrimage towards the river of death[224]. It presents itself as a gentle reminder that death is 'obvious' (*Carmex17M*), and suggests that through a renewed *ars morendi* we are to embrace death and playfully engage life in an altruistic manner rather than fearing to play[159]. Hence, *Fortnite's* theology promotes moving away from resisting death to acknowledging that death is an inevitable event, embracing it, and playing until it's your turn. Death stops being finite, and becomes a free disposition of oneself[225] and a mere alteration of the mode of existence, where the soul acquires a "closer intimacy [and] a more interior relationship"[225] with the universe. Similarly, in *Fortnite*

players tend to socialise much more post-death (*Palmolive16F; Fiary18M*). Since Christ died our death[226] and His spiritual being was released to the whole world[175], our death opens us to a relationship with creation, and *Fortnite's* death releases the player to focus more on socialising. Christian theology thus demands that we 'do' death differently because our theology 'does' life differently[227].

D. Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed three main theological themes which emerged from the interviews. As presented, *Fortnite* is laden with theological themes, particularly in the thanato-theological domain. While at face value fun can be seen as frippery, or at the polar extreme from faith[183], if the gamer allows the game to act as a catechetical space, *Fortnite* can be spoken of as a 'field hospital'[195]. Due to its ability to facilitate socialisation, the game entices participation in the eschatological-altruistic fun.

Secondly, against *Fortnite's* gnostic representation, as a Church we are to be alert to dualistic/reincarnation theologies. The two interviewees outlined a conflation of theologies, which I presume stems from the local theology of 'fear of God' and thus aimed to postpone what is deemed as the harsh judgement of God. This research launches us to rethink an *Evangelii Gaudium*-inspired catechetical plan which re-values God's personal relationship with creation and the unitive aspect of the human person[228].

Thirdly, I postulated that *Fortnite* presents a Christian understanding of death. Given that death is ubiquitous in *Fortnite*, the player is constantly reminded that she is always journeying on life's pilgrimage to death[224]. Yet, she is also reminded that although ludologically there is permadeath, the experience of fun surpasses death, transforming death into a gateway. What Rahner understands by a 'pancosmic' relationship, can be attributed to the *post-mortem* social-experience in *Fortnite*.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research embarked on a prolegomenon to study *Fortnite*'s thanato-theological representation. Given its recent conception, little to no research emerges in the literature. While the game's success is undisputed, the game offers a theological pedagogy where death is valued and played-with as opposed to Pascal's understanding of "bloody, no matter how fine the rest of the play"[226].

In Chapter II, through weaving of research, I have outlined that *Fortnite* is becoming a new Third Place for Gen-Z, and thus becoming a *locus theologicus*. Through its cartoonish-rendering of violence and its invitation to socialise, it transforms death.

Having defined the research methodology in Chapter III, I turned my attention to five Maltese Catholics Gen-Zs to spark a theological discussion on what is being presented to the gamer under the guise of 'cartoonish'-fun. As the interviews unwrapped, it became evident that a Christian understanding of death is not being espoused by all these youths. While this research cannot ascribe any qualitative correlation between *Fortnite*'s thanato-theological representation and their espoused theology, I would like to invite further research in this domain.

Furthermore, it was also noted that while *Fortnite* can be spoken of as a violent video game (VVG), and thus is expected to increase mortality salience[217], this was not exhibited in the word fragment test[115]. However, future quantitative research is necessary to be able to claim that either *Fortnite* is not a VVG or to study why it does not increase mortality salience.

Christian theology has always exhorted "not [to] grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13). Augustine and Aquinas differ and speak of grief as rational and appropriate, but the late-Rahner and *Gaudium et Spes*[229] inspire us to see death as *also* hope-filled and a "positive good"[226]. While death remains fearful, when it is creaturised and mortalised as 'sister death'[173], it can be played-with because it is reconcilable through the Paschal mystery[175]. By presenting the actual battle as *only* one of the ways to experience fun, *Fortnite* presents death as a gateway towards a more engaged social-networking. During battle, socialising is limited to emotes and a few chit-chats, but after the player is forced-out from the arena she can engage in more socialising.

Connecting with people and with nature (Fairy18M)

This socialising permeates the 'magic-circle' of the game[14] and in a Schutzian-manner[230], through humour and play, *Fortnite* helps the player to theologically transform the death experience into a 'positive good'. Humour-rich and fun-filled, *Fortnite*, transports the player, even if only fleetingly, into a world of meaning-making. While it negatively presents a gnostic understanding of the body/spirit dualism, it transforms death as a way of deeper socialising. A 'good death' can be truly an experience of 'peace' and 'not scary' (*Dawn19M*) if

understood 'positively'. One can posit that *Fortnite* purifies the instinct of 'friending'. "Friendship grows in an embodied mutuality"[231], and thus it springs the player into seeking more meaningful relationships. As Rahner speculates, death releases the person to be perfectly unionised with all[232], and to be in reconciliation with God and creation[226]. Similarly, *Fortnite* releases the player from the anguish of avoiding death, to better socialise in the social-network inherent in the game. In sum, *Fortnite* robs death of its destructive nature, and liturgically 'skins' it with a hope-filled social-friendship.

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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VIII. APPENDIX I

TABLE 2.
FORTNITE'S AXIS PRIORITIES

Players over World	Fortnite's reaction	Tally
ADD communication facilities	Yes	1
ADD player-to-player interaction	Yes – using emotes	1
DECREASE size of the world	Yes – due to the storm	1
INCREASE connectivity between rooms	Yes – destroy buildings and walk on structures while still being built	1
MAXIMIZE simultaneous players	Yes – 100 in a very small map	1
RESTRICT building privileges to a select few	No – everyone can build	0
MINIMIZE the use of mobiles	No – jetpacks and other mobiles help in moving from one side to the other	0
		5/7 = 71%
World over players		
ONLY basic communication	No	0
LIMIT player-to-player interaction	No	0
EASY building facilities	Yes	1
MAXIMIZE world size	No	0
LIMIT room connections	No	0
MANY can build	Yes – all	1
MAXIMIZE mobile ways	Yes	1
		3/7 = 50%
Interacting over Acting		
HELP facilities offer vague information	Yes – no help actually	1
PRODUCE cryptic hints when players appear stuck	No	0
MAXIMIZE effects of commands	No	0

LOWER rewards	No	0
SHALLOW level system	Yes	1
AMUSING responses for commands	Yes – emotes	1
CONSISTENT atmosphere in room descriptions	No	0
LIMIT number of commands in an area	No	0
Scatter SMALL puzzles around map	No	0
ALLOW builders to introduce new commands	No	0
		3/10 = 30%
Acting over Interacting		
PROVIDE game manual	No – only streaming	0
AUTO-MAP facilities	No	0
AUTO-LOG facilities	No	0
RAISE rewards for achievement	Yes	1
EXTENSIVE level system	No	0
MEANINGFUL responses for commands	No – emotes add no ludological meaning	0
LARGE puzzles	No	0
MANY commands related to fights	No	0
ONLY allow building by top-quality builders	No	0
		1/9 = 11%

TABLE 3.
PLEX IN *FORTNITE*²⁷

PLEX category	Description: Experience of...	Features in <i>Fortnite</i> ?
Competition	challenging oneself, opponent(s) or system	Yes – BR is all about competing
Completion	reaching targets set by the game and/or earlier tasks	Yes – BP comes with a number of challenges
Challenge	learning skills in a challenging situation	Yes – each weapon involves a learning curve
Exploration	exploring of virtual space and possibly oneself too (ex. In <i>Sims</i> one can experiment with alternate fashion/gender)	Yes – island is sewn with loot
Fellowship	friendship and/or intimacy even with Non-Playing Characters (NPCs)	Yes – especially in team modes, players would need to rely on each other to win. RL friends tend to ‘buddy up’
Control	manifestation of controlling (ex. playing God in <i>Sims</i> , and well driving the car in <i>GTA</i>)	Yes – experienced only if understood as mastering the skills to defend oneself and attack intelligently, while budgeting building assets
Discovery	discovering a new solution, place or property	Yes – loot keeps randomly appearing while structures are demolished and rebuilt
Relaxation	unwinding, stress relief, and calmness; “a central gratification” of studied games	Yes/No – while many players would see <i>Fortnite</i> as ‘unwinding’ we are witnessing a number of players being hooked to it[233]–[236]: “It’s similar to working with parents who have a child addicted to drugs”[237] and causing 4,500 divorces a year[234]
Suffering	frustration, anger and disappointment	Yes – as exhibited in[238]–[242]
Fantasy	make-believe where players can create stories	Yes

²⁷ Categories marked with (*) are added from [87].

Nurture	nurturing and caretaking	No – there is no nurturing of character of NPCs
Captivation	forgetting one’s surroundings, time, natural needs	Yes – players have exhibited captivation tendencies[234], [237], [243]
Thrill	thrill derived from actual/perceived danger	Yes – BR intensifies risks
Humor*	humourising a fatal issue	Yes – death is trivialised
Cruelty*	rewarding acts of violence	Yes – killing is awarded ‘xp’
Sadism/Submission*	competing against RL friends who are way better might be impossible[16]	Yes – very often RL friends tend team up and any taunting due to mistakes extend to the RL
Simulation	perceiving a representation of everyday life	Yes – emotes
Expression	expressing oneself in a creative fashion	Yes – skins
Sensation	meaningful sensory experience	Yes – limited-time purchases[244] and customisation[245] add to this experience. Streaming adds to sensation too[246].
Sympathy	sharing emotional feelings	Yes
Subversion	breaking social roles, rules and norms	No/Rarely – as explained by Sloan[247]
Eroticism	sexual arousal	No – <i>Fortnite</i> fixes anything ‘controversial’ such as the ‘breast physics’ emote[248]